

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OU_170581

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY

OSMANIA UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Call No. 821.09/5935

Accession No. 11072

Author Sturgeon

Title Studies of Contemporary Poets 1916

This book should be returned on or before the date last marked below.

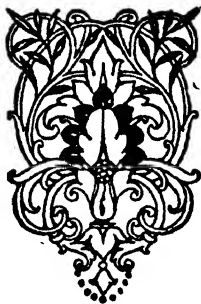
STUDIES OF
CONTEMPORARY
POETS



By

MARY C. STURGEON

AUTHOR OF "WOMEN OF THE CLASSICS" ETC.



LONDON

GEORGE G. HARRAP & COMPANY

2 & 3 PORTSMOUTH STREET KINGSWAY W.C.

MCMXVI

PRINTED AT
THE BALLANTYNE PRESS
LONDON, ENGLAND

TO
PROFESSOR W. H. HUDSON
IN GRATITUDE AND ESTEEM

Acknowledgment

THE author begs to offer warm thanks to the following poets and their publishers, for the use of the quotations given in these studies :

Mr Masfield and " John Presland " ; Mr John Lane for the work of Mr Abercrombie and Mrs Woods ; Messrs Sidgwick and Jackson for the work of Miss Macaulay and Rupert Brooke ; Mr A. C. Fifield and Mr Elkin Mathews for the work of Mr W. H. Davies ; Messrs Constable for the work of Mr de la Mare ; Mr Elkin Mathews, *New Numbers*, and the Samurai Press for the work of Mr W. W. Gibson ; the Poetry Bookshop for the work of Mr Hodgson ; Messrs Max Goschen Ltd. for the work of Mr Ford Madox Hueffer ; Messrs Maunsel and Co Ltd for the work of the members of " An Irish Group " and of Mr Stephens ; the Samurai Press and the Poetry Bookshop for the work of Mr Monroe ; and Mr William Heinemann for the work of Mrs Naidu.

Contents

LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE	PAGE II
RUPERT BROOKE	36
WILLIAM H. DAVIES	53
WALTER DE LA MARE	72
WILFRID WILSON GIBSON	87
RALPH HODGSON	108
FORD MADOX HUEFFER	122
AN IRISH GROUP	137
ROSE MACAULAY	181
JOHN MASEFIELD	197
HAROLD MONRO	217
SAROJINI NAIDU	235
"JOHN PRESLAND"	248
JAMES STEPHENS	282
MARGARET L. WOODS	301
BIBLIOGRAPHY	327

Lascelles Abercrombie

IN the sweet chorus of modern poetry one may hear a strange new harmony. It is the life of our time, evoking its own music: constraining the poetic spirit to utter its own message. The peculiar beauty of contemporary poetry, with all its fresh and varied charm, grows from that; and in that, too, its vitality is assured. Its art has the deep sanction of loyalty: its loyalty draws inspiration from the living source.

There is a fair company of these new singers; and it would seem that there should be large hope for a generation, whether in its life or letters, which can find such expression. Listening carefully, however, some notes ring clearer, stronger, or more significant than others; and of these the voice of Mr Abercrombie appears to carry the fullest utterance. It is therefore a happy chance that the name which stands first here, under a quite arbitrary arrangement, has also a natural right to be put at the head of such a group of moderns.

But that is not an implicit denial to those others of fidelity to their time. It is a question of degree and of range. Every poet in this band will be found to represent some aspect of our complex life—its awakened social conscience or its frank joy in the

Contemporary Poets

world of sense; its mysticism or its repudiation of dogma, in art as in religion; its mistrust of materialism or keen perception of reality; its worship of the future, or assimilation of the heritage of the past to its own ideals; its lyrical delight in life or dramatic re-creation of it; its insistence upon the essential poetry of common things, or its discovery of rare new values in experience and expression.

This poetry frequently catches one or another of those elements, and crystallizes it out of a mere welter into definite form and recognizable beauty. But the claim for Mr Abercrombie is that he has drawn upon them more largely: that he has made a wider synthesis: that his work has a unity more comprehensive and complete. It is in virtue of this that he may be said to represent his age so fully; but that is neither to accuse him of shouting with the crowd, nor to lay on the man in the street the burden of the poet's idealism. He is, indeed, in a deeper sense than politics could make him, a democrat: perhaps that inheres in the poetic temperament. But intellectuality like his, vision so brilliant, a spirit so keen and a sensuous equipment so delicate and bountiful are not to be leashed to the common pace. That is a truism, of course: so often it seems to be the destiny of the poet to

Lascelles Abercrombie

be at once with the people and above them. But it needs repetition here, because it applies with unusual force. This is a poet whose instinct binds him inescapably to his kind, while all the time his genius is soaring where the average mind may sometimes find it hard to follow.

One is right, perhaps, in believing that this particular affinity with his time is instinctive, for it reveals itself in many ways, subtler or more obvious, through all his work. As forthright avowal it naturally occurs most in his earlier poems. There is, for example, the humanitarianism of the fine "Indignation" ode in his first volume, called *Interludes and Poems*. This is an invocation of righteous anger against the deplorable conditions of the workers' lives. A fierce impulse drives through the ode, in music that is sometimes troubled by its own vehemence.

Wilt thou not come again, thou godly sword,
Into the Spirit's hands ?

• • • • •
Against our ugly wickedness,
Against our wanton dealing of distress,
The forced defilement of humanity,

• • • • •
And shall there be no end to life's expense
In mills and yards and factories,

Contemporary Poets

With no more recompense
Than sleep in warrens and low styes,
And undelighted food ?
Shall still our ravenous and unhandsome mood
Make men poor and keep them poor ?—

In the same volume there is a passage which may be said to present the obverse of this idea. It occurs in an interlude called "An Escape," and is only incidental to the main theme, which is much more abstract than that of the ode. A young poet, Idwal, has withdrawn from the society of his friends, to meditate about life among the hills. All the winter long he has kept in solitude, his spirit seeking for mastery over material things. As the spring dawns he is on the verge of triumph, and the soul is about to put off for ever its veil of sense, when news reaches him from the outer world. His little house, from which he has been absent so long, has been broken into, and robbed, by a tramp. The friend who comes to tell about it ends his tale by a word of sympathy—"I'm sorry for you"—and Idwal replies :

It's sorry I am for that perverted tramp,
As having gone from being the earth's friend,
Whom she would have at all her private treats.
Now with the foolery called possession he
Has dirtied his own freedom, cozen'd all

Lascelles Abercrombie

His hearing with the lies of ownership.
The earth may call to him in vain henceforth,
He's got a step-dame now, his Goods. . . .

Evidence less direct but equally strong is visible in the later work. It lies at the very root of the tragedy of *Deborah*, a heroine drawn from fisher-folk, who in the extremity of fear for her lover's life cries :

O but my heart is dying in me, waiting :

.

For us, with lives so hazardous, to love
Is like a poor girl's game of being a queen.

And it is found again, gathering materials for the play called *The End of the World* out of the lives of poor and simple people. Here the impulse is clear enough, but sometimes it takes a subtler form, and then it occasionally betrays the poet into a solecism. For his sense of the unity of the race is so strong that natural distinctions sometimes go the way of artificial ones. He has so completely identified himself with humanity, and for preference with the lowly in mind and estate, that he has not seldom endowed a humble personality with his own large gifts. Thus you find Deborah using this magnificent plea for her sweetheart's life :

Contemporary Poets

. . . there's something sacred about lovers.

.

For there is wondrous more than the joy of life
In lovers ; there's in them God Himself
Taking great joy to love the life He made :
We are God's desires more than our own, we lovers,
You dare not injure God !

Thus, too, a working wainwright suddenly startled
into consciousness of the purpose of the life-force
muses :

Why was I like a man sworn to a thing
Working to have my wains in every curve,
Ay, every tenon, right and as they should be ?
Not for myself, not even for those wains :
But to keep in me living at its best
The skill that must go forward and shape the world,
Helping it on to make some masterpiece.

And with the same largesse a fiddling vagabond,
old and blind, thief, liar, and seducer, is made to
utter a lyric ecstasy on the words which are the
poet's instrument :

Words : they are messengers from out God's heart,
Intimate with him ; through his deed they go,
This passion of him called the world, approving
All of fierce gladness in it, bidding leap
To a yet higher rapture ere it sink.

. . . There be

Lascelles Abercrombie

Who hold words made of thought. But as stars slide
Through air, so words, bright aliens, slide through
thought,
Leaving a kindled way.

Now, since Synge has shown us that the poetry in the peasant heart does utter itself spontaneously, in fitting language, we must be careful how we deny, even to these peasants who are not Celts, a natural power of poetic expression. But there is a difference. That spontaneous poetry of simple folk which is caught for us in *The Playboy of the Western World* or *The Well of the Saints*, is generally a lyric utterance springing directly out of emotion. It is not, as here, the result of a mental process, operating amongst ideas and based on knowledge which the peasant is unlikely to possess. One may be justified, therefore, in a show of protest at the incongruity; we feel that such people do not talk like that. The poet has transferred to them too much of his own intellectuality. Yet it will probably be a feeble protest, proportionate to the degree that we are disturbed by it, which is practically not at all. For as these people speak, we are convinced of their reality: they live and move before us. And when we consider their complete and robust individuality, it would appear that the poet's method is vindicated by the dramatic

Contemporary Poets

force of the presentment. It needs no other vindication, and is no doubt a reasoned process. For Mr Abercrombie makes no line of separation between thought and emotion; and having entered by imagination into the hearts of his people, he might claim to be merely interpreting them—making conscious and vocal that which was already in existence there, however obscurely. There is a hint of this at a point in *The End of the World* where one of the men says that he had *felt* a certain thought go through his mind—"though 'twas a thing of such a flight I could not read its colour." And in this way Deborah, being a human soul of full stature, sound of mind and body and all her being flooded with emotion, would be capable of feeling the complex thought attributed to her, even if no single strand of its texture had ever been clear in her mind. While as to the fiddling lyrist, rogue and poet, one sees no reason why the whole argument should not be closed by a gesture in the direction of Heine or Villon.

We turn now to the content of thought in Mr Abercrombie's poetry—an aspect of his genius to be approached with diffidence by a writer conscious of limitations. For though we believed we saw that his affinity with the democratic spirit of his age is instinctive, deeply rooted

Lascelles Abercrombie

and persistent, his genius is by no means ruled by instinct. It is intellectual to an extreme degree, moving easily in abstract thought and apparently trained in philosophic speculation. Indeed, his speculative tendency had gone as far as appeared to be legitimate in poetry, when he wisely chose another medium for it in the volume of prose *Dialogues* published in 1913.

It must not be gathered from this, however, that the philosophic pieces are dull or difficult reading. On the contrary, they are frequently cast into the form of a story with a dramatic basis; and although the torrent of thought sometimes keeps the mind astretch to follow it, it would be hard to discover a single obscure line. An astonishing combination of qualities has gone to produce this result: subtlety with vigour, delicacy with strength, and loftiness with simplicity. Things elusive and immaterial are caught and fixed in vivid imagery; and often charged with poignant human interest. No other modern poet expresses thought so abstract with such force, or describes the adventures of the voyaging soul with such clarity. It suggests high harmony in the development of sense and spirit: it explains the apparent incompatibility between his rapture of delight in the physical world and his spiritual

Contemporary Poets

exaltation: while it hints a reason for his pre-occupation with the duality in human life, and his vision of an ultimate union of the rival powers.

We may note in passing how this reacts upon the form of his work. It has created a unique vocabulary (enriched from many sources but derived from no single one), which is nervous, flexible, vigorous, impassioned: assimilating to its grave beauty words homely, colloquial or quaint, until the range of it seems all but infinite.

Again, rather curiously, the thought has tended toward the dramatic form. At first glance that form would seem to be unsuitable for the expression of reflectiveness so deep as this. Yet here is a poet whose dominant theme might be defined, tritely, as the development of the soul; and he hardly ever writes in any other way.

The fact sends us back to the contrast with the Victorians. The representative poet then, musing about life and death and the evolution of the soul, felt himself impelled to the elegiac form, or the idyll. But the nature of the thought itself has changed. The representative poet now does not stand and lament, however exquisitely, because reality has shattered dogma: neither does he try to create an epic out of the incredible theme of a perfect soul. He accepts reality; and then he

Lascelles Abercrombie

perceives that the perfect soul *is* incredible, besides being poor material for his art. But on the other hand, while he takes care to seize and hold fast truth: while it does not occur to him to mourn that she is implacable: he resolutely denies to phenomena, the appearance of things, the whole of truth. That is to say, he has transcended at once the despair of the Victorians and their materialism. He has banished their lyric grief for a dead past, along with their scientific and religious dogmas. That was a bit of iconoclasm imperatively demanded of him by his own soul; but from the fact that he is a poet, it is denied to him to find final satisfaction in the region of sense and consciousness.

Thus there arises a duality, and a sense of conflict, which would account for the manner of his expression, without the need to refer it to the general tendency of modern poetry towards the dramatic form. Doubtless, however, that also has been an influence, for the virility of his genius and the positive strain in his philosophy would lead that way.

One can hardly say that there are perceptible stages in Mr Abercrombie's thought. He is one of the few poets with no crudities to repent, either artistic or philosophic. Yet there is a poem in his first volume, a morality called

Contemporary Poets

"The New God"; and there is another piece called "The Sale of St Thomas," first published in 1911, which are relatively simple. Here he is content to take material that is traditional, both to poetry and religion, and infuse into it so much of modern significance as it will carry. The first re-tells the mediæval legend of a girl changed by God into his own likeness in order to save her from violence. There is, apt to our present study, but too long to give in full, at least one passage that is magnificent in conception and imagery alike. It is the voice of God, answering the girl's prayer that she may be saved by the destruction of her beauty. The voice declares that the petition is sweet and shall be granted, that he will quit the business of the universe, that he will "put off the nature of the world," and become

God, when all the multitudinous flow
Of Being sets backward to Him ; God, when He
Is only glory. . . .

The "Sale of St Thomas" also treats a legend, with originality and power. This remarkable poem is already well known: but one may at least call attention to the fitness and dignity with which the poet has placed the modern gospel upon the lips of the Christ. Thomas has been intercepted by his master, as he is about to run away for the second time from his mission to India.

Lascelles Abercrombie

Now, Thomas, know thy sin. It was not fear
Easily may a man crouch down for fear,
And yet rise up on firmer knees, and face
The hailing storm of the world with graver courage.
But prudence, prudence is the deadly sin,
And one that groweth deep into a life,
With hardening roots that clutch about the breast.
For this refuses faith in the unknown powers
Within man's nature ; shrewdly bringeth all
Their inspiration of strange eagerness
To a judgment bought by safe experience ;
Narrows desire into the scope of thought.
But it is written in the heart of man,
Thou shalt no larger be than thy desire.
Thou must not therefore stoop thy spirit's sight
To pore only within the candle-gleam
Of conscious wit and reasonable brain ;

.
But send desire often forth to scan
The immense night which is thy greater soul ;
Knowing the possible, see thou try beyond it
Into impossible things, unlikely ends ;
And thou shalt find thy knowledgeable desire
Grow large as all the regions of thy soul,
Whose firmament doth cover the whole of Being,
And of created purpose reach the ends.

Perhaps the thought here is not so simple as the pellucid expression makes it to appear : yet the conventional material on which the poet is working restrains it to at least relative simplicity. When,

Contemporary Poets

however, his inspiration is moving quite freely, unhampered by tradition either of technique or of theme, the result is more complex and more characteristic.

The tragedy called "Blind", in his first volume, is an example. The plot of this dramatic piece is probably unique. If one gave the bald outline of it, it might seem to be merely a story of crude revenge. It is concerned with rude and outlawed people: it springs out of elemental passions—fierce love turned to long implacable hatred, and then reverting to tenderness and pity and overwhelming remorse. And yet there are probably no subtler studies in poetry than the three persons of this little drama—the woman who has reared her idiot son to be the weapon to avenge her wrongs upon the father he has never known: the blind son himself; and his father, the same fiddling tramp whom we have already noted. There are points in the delineation of all three which are very brilliantly imagined: the change in the woman when she meets at last the human wreck who had once been her handsome lover: the idiot youth hungering to express the beauty which is revealed to him, through touch, in a child's golden hair, the warmth of fire, the mysterious presence of the dark:

Lascelles Abercrombie

. . . . like a wing's shelter bending down.
I've often thought, if I were tall enough
And reacht my hand up, I should touch the soft
Spread feathers of the resting flight of him
Who covers us with night, so near he seems
Stooping and holding shadow over us,
Roofing the air with wings. It's plain to feel
Some large thing's near, and being good to us.

But, above all, there is the character of the fiddler. At first glance, the phenomenon looks common enough and all its meaning obvious. "A wastrel" one would say, glibly defining the phenomenon; and add "a *drunken* wastrel," believing that we had explained it. But the poet sees further, apprehends more and understands better. Drunken indeed, but an intoxication older and more divine than that of brandy began the business; and much brandy had not quenched the elder fire. It flamed in him still, mostly a sinister glow, fed from his bad and sorrowful past, but leaping on occasion to fair radiance, as in the talk with his unknown son, when some magnetic influence drew the two blind men together and made them friends before they had any knowledge of relationship. Of the many finer touches in this poem, none is more delicate and none more moving than the suggestion of unconscious affinity between these two: the idiot,

Contemporary Poets

with his half-awake mind, groping amidst shadows of ideas which to the older man are quick with inspiration.

SON.

What are words ?

TRAMP. God's love ! Here's a man after my own
heart ;

We must be brothers, lad.

But besides his dramatic and psychological interest, the fiddler is important because he seems to represent the poet's philosophy in its brief iconoclastic phase. For we find placed in his lips a destructive satire of the old theological doctrine of Good and Evil. The passage is too long to quote, and it would be unfair to mutilate it. Incidentally we may note, however, the keen salt humour of it, and how that quality establishes the breadth and sanity of the poet's outlook. The point of peculiar interest at the moment is that this phase passes with the particular poem—an early one ; and thenceforward it is replaced by more constructive thought. We come to "The Fool's Adventure," for instance, and find the "Seeker" travelling through all the regions of mind and spirit to find God, and the nature and cause of sin. His quest brings him first to the Self of the World, and he believes that this is God. But the Sage corrects him :

Lascelles Abercrombie

. . . Poor fool,
And didst thou think this present sensible world
Was God ? . . .

.
It is a name,
The name Lord God chooses to go by, made
In languages of stars and heavens and life.

And when, finally, he has won through to a certain
palace at the "verge of things," he cries his question
to the unseen king within.

SEEKER. Then thou art God ?

WITHIN. Ay, many call me so.
And yet, though words were never large enough
To take me made, I have a better name.

SEEKER. Then truly, who art thou ?

WITHIN. I am Thy Self.

Another aspect of the same idea, caught in a more
lyrical mood, will be found in the poem called
"The Trance." The poet is standing upon a hill-
side alone at night, watching the "continual
stars" and overawed by the vastness and "fixt
law" of the universe. Then, in a sudden revelation
of perhaps a fraction of a minute :

I was exalted above surety
And out of time did fall.
As from a slander that did long distress,
A sudden justice vindicated me
From the customary wrong of Great and Small.

Contemporary Poets

I stood outside the burning rims of place,
Outside that corner, consciousness.
Then was I not in the midst of thee
Lord God ?

That, however, is the triumphant ecstasy of a moment. More often he is preoccupied with the duality in human nature, and in "An Escape" there is a fine simile of the struggle :

Desire of infinite things, desire of finite.
. . . 'tis the wrestle of the twain makes man.
—As two young winds, schooled 'mong the slopes and
caves
Of rival hills that each to other look
Across a sunken tarn, on a still day
Run forth from their sundered nurseries, and meet
In the middle air. . . .
And when they close, their struggle is called Man,
Distressing with his strife and flurry the bland
Pool of existence, that lay quiet before
Holding the calm watch of Eternity.

The incidence of finite and infinite is felt with equal force : sense is as powerful as spirit, and therein of course lives the keenness of the strife. In "Soul and Body" there is a passage—only one of many, however—in which the rapture of sensuous beauty is expressed. The spirit is imagined to be just ready to put off sense, to be for ever caught out of

28

Lascelles Abercrombie

“that corner, consciousness.” And the body reminds it :

Thou wilt miss the wonder I have made for thee
Of this dear world with my fashioning senses,
The blue, the fragrance, the singing, and the green.

Great spaces of grassy land, and all the air
One quiet, the sun taking golden ease
Upon an afternoon :
Tall hills that stand in weather-blinded trances
As if they heard, drawn upward and held there,
Some god's eternal tune ;

We may take our last illustration of this subject from a passage at the end of the volume called *Emblems of Love*. It is from a poem so rich in beauty and so closely wrought, that to quote from it is almost inevitably to do the author an injustice. But the same may be said about the whole book: while single poems from it will disclose high individual value, both as art and philosophy, their whole effect and meaning can only be completely seized by reading them as a sequence, and in the light of the conception to which they all contribute.

The book is designed to show, in three great movements representing birth, growth, and perfection, the evolution of the human spirit in the

Contemporary Poets

world. The spirit, which is here synonymous with love, is traced from the instant which is chosen to mark its birth (the awakening sense of beauty in primitive man), through its manifold states of excess and defect, up to a transcendent union which draws the dual powers into a single ecstasy. The greatness of the central theme is matched by the dignity of its presentment, while the dramatic form in which it is embodied saves it from mere abstraction. We see the dawn of the soul in the wolf-hunter, suddenly perceiving beauty in nature and in women: the vindication of the soul by Vashti, magnificently daring to prove that it is no mere vassal to beauty: and the perfecting of the soul in the terrible paradox of Judith's virginity. But it is in one of the closing pieces, called fittingly "The Eternal Wedding," that the poet attains the summit of his thought along these lines; prefiguring the ultimate union of the conflicting powers of life in one perfect rapture.

. . . I have
Golden within me the whole fate of man :
That every flesh and soul belongs to one
Continual joyward ravishment . . .
That life hath highest gone which hath most joy.
For like great wings forcefully smiting air
And driving it along in rushing rivers,

Lascelles Abercrombie

Desire of joy beats mightily pulsing forward
The world's one nature. . . .

. . . . so we are driven
Onward and upward in a wind of beauty,
Until man's race be wielded by its joy
Into some high incomparable day,
Where perfectly delight may know itself,—
No longer need a strife to know itself,
Only by its prevailing over pain.

That is the topmost peak that his philosophy has gained—for just so long as to give assurance that it exists. But no one supposes that he will dwell there: it is altogether too high: the atmosphere is too rare. It was reached only by the concentration of certain poetical powers, chiefly speculative imagination, which carried him safely over the chasms of a lower altitude. But when other powers are in the ascendant, as for instance in *The End of the World*: when he is recalled to actuality by that keen eye for fact which is so rare a gift to genius of this type, the terror of those lower chasms is revealed. Here is one of the characters reflecting on the thought of the end of the world, which he believes to be imminent from an approaching comet:

Life, the mother who lets her children play
So seriously busy, trade and craft,—
Life with her skill of a million years' perfection
To make her heart's delighted glorying

Contemporary Poets

Of sunlight, and of clouds about the moon,
Spring lighting her daffodils, and corn
Ripening gold to ruddy, and giant seas,
And mountains sitting in their purple clothes—
O life I am thinking of, life the wonder,
All blotcht out by a brutal thrust of fire
Like a midge that a clumsy thumb squashes and smears.

That passage will serve to point the single comment on technique with which this study must close. It has not been selected for the purpose, and therefore is not the finest example that could be chosen. It is, however, typical of the blank-verse form which largely prevails in this poetry, and which, in its very texture, reveals the same extraordinary combination of qualities which we have observed in the poet's genius.

We have already seen that spiritual vision is here united with intellectuality as lucid as it is powerful: that the mystic is also the humanitarian: that imagination is balanced by a good grip on reality; and that the sense-impressions are fine as well as exuberant. We have seen, too, that this diversity and apparent contrast, although resulting in an art of complex beauty, do not tend towards confusion or obscurity. There has been a complete fusion of the elements, and the molten stream that is poured for us is of glowing clarity.

Lascelles Abercrombie

Exactly the same feature is discernible in the style of this verse. Look at the last passage for a moment and consider its effect. — It is impossible to define in a single word, because of its complexity. The mind, lingering delightedly over the metaphor of life the mother, is suddenly awed by the magnitude of the idea which succeeds it. The æsthetic sense is taken by the light and colour of the middle lines, and then, as if the breath were caught on a half-sob, a wave of emotion follows, pensive at first, but rising abruptly to a note that is as rough as a curse. There are more shades of thought, lightly reflective or glooming with prescience ; and there are more degrees of emotion, from tenderness to wrath, than we have time to analyze. The point for the moment is the manner in which they are conveyed, and the adequacy of the instrument to convey them.

The texture of the verse itself will provide evidence of this. Here are barely a dozen lines of our English heroic verse ; and they will be found to contain the maximum of metrical variety. Probably only two, or at most three of them (it depends upon scansion, of course) are of the regular iambic pentameter : that is to say, built up strictly from the iamb, which is the unit of this form. All the others are varied by the insertion at some point

Contemporary Poets

in the line, and frequently at two or three points, of a different verse-unit, dactyl, anapæst, trochee or spondee; and no two lines are varied in exactly the same way.

But, besides the range of the instrument, there is the exquisite harmony of it with mood or idea. The strong down-beat of the trochee summons the intellect to consider a thought: the dactyl will follow with the quick perception of a simile: the iamb will punctuate rhythm: anacrusis will suggest the half-caught breath of rising emotion, and turbulent feeling will pour through spondee, dactyl, and anapæst. And so with the diction. Just as we find a measure which is both vigorous and light, precise and flexible, easily bending law to beauty; so in the language there is a corresponding union of strength and grace, homeliness and dignity. Could a great conception be stated in a simpler phrase than that of the two first lines?

Life, the mother who lets her children play
So seriously busy, trade and craft—

and yet this phrase, simple and lucid as it is, conveys a sense of boundless tenderness and pity, playing over the surface of a deeper irony. Doubtless its strength and clarity come from the fact that each word is of the common coin of daily life; but its

Lascelles Abercrombie

atmosphere, an almost infinite suggestiveness of familiar things brooded over in a wistful mood, comes partly at least through the colloquial touch.

Mr Abercrombie has no fear to be colloquial, when that is the proper garment of his thought, the outer symbol of the inner reality. Nor is he the least afraid of fierce and ugly words, when they are apt. The last line of our passage illustrates this. Taken out of its setting, and considering merely the words, one would count a poet rash indeed who would venture such a harsh collocation. But repeat the line aloud, and its metrical felicity will appear at once: put it back in its setting, as the culmination of a wave of feeling that has been gathering strength throughout: remember the idea (of beauty annihilated by senseless law and blind force), which has kindled that emotion; and then we shall marvel at the art which makes the line a growl of impotent rage.

All of which is merely to say that the spirit of this poetry has evolved for itself a living body, wearing its beauty delightedly, rejoicing in its own vitality, and unashamed either of its elemental impulse or its transcendent vision.

Rupert Brooke

Born at Rugby on August 3, 1887

Died at Lemnos on April 23, 1915

PROBABLY most English people who love their country and their country's greatest poet have at some time taken joy to identify the spirit of the two. England and Shakespeare : the names have leapt together and flamed into union before the eyes of many a youngster who was much too dazzled by the glory to see how and whence it came. But returning from a festival performance on some soft April midnight, or leaning out of the bedroom window to share with the stars and the wind the exaltation which the play had evoked, the revelation suddenly shone. And thenceforward April 23 was by something more than a coincidence the day both of Shakespeare and St George.

Reason might come back with the daylight to rule over fancy ; and the cool lapse of time might remove the moment far enough to betray the humour of it. But the glow never quite faded ; or if it did it only gave place to the steadier and clearer light of conviction. One came to see how the poet, by reason of his complete humanity,

Rupert Brooke

stood for mankind ; and how, from certain sharp characteristics of our race, he stood pre-eminently for English folk. And coming thence to the narrower but firmer ground of historical fact, one saw how shiningly he represented the Elizabethan Age, with its eager, inquisitive, and adventurous spirit ; its craving to fulfil to the uttermost a gift of glorious and abundant life.

Now precisely in that way, though not of course in the same superlative degree, one may see Rupert Brooke standing for the England of his time. And when this poet died at Lemnos on April 23, 1915, those who knew and loved his work must have felt the tragic fitness of the date with the event. If the gods of war had decreed his death, they had at least granted that he might pass on England's day. In him indeed was manifested the poetic spirit of the race, warm with human passion and sane with laughter : soaring on wings of fire but nesting always on the good earth. And though one does not claim to find in him the highest point or the extremest advance to which the thought of his day had gone, he stands pre-eminently for that day in the steel-clear light of his gallant spirit.

The title of Rupert Brooke's posthumous book—*1914*—signifies that moment of English history which is reflected in his work. He is the symbol

Contemporary Poets

of that year in a double sense. He represents the calamitous political event of it in his voluntary service to the State, and the manner of his death. Thus by the accident of circumstance which made him eminent and vocal, he serves to speak for the silent millions of English men and women who splendidly sprang to duty. But in his poetry there is a closer and deeper relation to that tragic year. Incomplete as it may be : youthful and prankish as some of it is, the thought and manner of the time are imaged there. A certain level of humane culture had been reached, a certain philosophy of life had been evolved, and a definite attitude to reality taken. Lightly but clearly, these things which reflect the colour of our civilization at August 1914 are crystallized in Rupert Brooke's poetry to that date. But at that point the image, like the whole order of which it was the reflection, was shattered by the crash of arms ; and the few poems which he wrote subsequently are preoccupied with the spiritual crisis which the war precipitated.

Most of the admirers of this poet have seen only in his last pieces the singular identity of his spirit with the spirit of his country. And that is so noble a concord that it cannot be missed. For when England plunged into the greatest war of history, she flung off in the act several centuries of her age.

Rupert Brooke

Priceless things, slowly and patiently acquired, went overboard as mere impedimenta ; but in the relapse, the slipping backward to an earlier time and consequent recovery of youth, with its ardour and passion, its recklessness and generosity and courage, the optimist saw a reward for all that was lost. So with the poetry of Rupert Brooke. Those few last sonnets, as it were the soul of rejuvenated England, seem to the same hopeful eye a complete compensation, not only for the wasted individual life, but for the beauty and significance of the age for which he stood, now irrevocably lost.

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead !
There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.
These laid the world away ; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth ; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhopèd serene,
That men call age ; and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow ! They brought us, for our dearth,
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage ;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again ;
And we have come into our heritage.

Before that renunciation one can only stand with

Contemporary Poets

bowed head, realizing perhaps more clearly than the giver did, the splendour of the gift. But he too, this representative of his age, knew the value of the life that he was casting away. It was indeed to him a "red sweet wine," precious for the "work and joy" it promised, and the sacred seed of immortality. It is this, above all, that his poetry signifies: a rich and exuberant life, keenly conscious of itself, and fully aware of the realities by which it is surrounded. Its nature grows from that—sensuous and *spirituelle*, passionate and intellectual, ingenuous and ironic, tragic and gay. Never before—no, not even in Donne, as some one has suggested—was such intensity of feeling coupled with such merciless clarity of sight: mental honesty so absolute, piercing so fierce a flame of ardour. ✓

From the fusion of those two powers comes the distinctive character of this poetry: the peculiar beauty of its gallant spirit. They are constant features of it from first to last, but they are not always perfectly fused nor equally present. In the earlier poems, to find which you must go back to the volume of 1911 and begin at the end of the book, they enter as separate and distinct components. One would expect that, of course, at this stage; and we shall not be surprised, either, if we discover that there is here a shade of excess

Rupert Brooke

in both qualities : a touch of self-consciousness and relative crudity. The point of interest is that they are so clearly the principal elements from which the subtle and complex beauty of the later work was evolved. Thus, facing one another on pages 84 and 85, are two apt examples. In "The Call" sheer passion is expressed. The poet's great love of life, taking shape for the moment as love of his lady, is here predominant.

Out of the nothingness of sleep,
The slow dreams of Eternity,
There was a thunder on the deep :
I came, because you called to me.

I broke the Night's primeval bars,
I dared the old abysmal curse,
And flashed through ranks of frightened stars
Suddenly on the universe !

.
I'll break and forge the stars anew,
Shatter the heavens with a song ;
Immortal in my love for you,
Because I love you, very strong.

But on the opposite page, the sonnet called "Dawn" swings to the extremest point from the magniloquence of that. It is realistic in a literal sense : a bit of wilful ugliness. Yet it springs, however distortedly, from the root of mental clarity and courage which

Contemporary Poets

was to produce such gracious blossoming thereafter. It is engaged with an exasperated account of a night journey in an Italian train : all the discomfort and weary irritation of it venting itself upon two unfortunate Teutons.

One of them wakes, and spits, and sleeps again.

The darkness shivers. A wan light through the rain
Strikes on our faces, drawn and white. Somewhere

A new day sprawls ; and, inside, the foul air
Is chill, and damp, and fouler than before. . . .
Opposite me two Germans sweat and snore.

It is not long, however, before we find that the two elements are beginning to combine ; and we soon meet, astonishingly, with the third great quality of the poet's genius. It is strange that imagination always has this power to surprise us. No matter if we have taught ourselves that poetry cannot begin to exist without it : no matter how watchful and alert we think we are, it will spring upon us unaware, taking possession of the mind with amazing exhilaration. That is especially true of the quality as it is found in Rupert Brooke's poetry. For, however you have schooled yourself, you do not expect imaginative power of the first degree to co-exist with sensuous joy so keen, and so acute an intelligence. Yet in a piece called " In Examina-

Rupert Brooke

tion" the miracle is wrought. This, too, is an early poem, which may be the reason why one can disengage the threads so easily; whilst a notable fact is that the delicate fabric of it is woven directly out of a commonplace bit of human experience. The poet is engaged with a scene that is decidedly unpromising for poetical treatment—all the stupidity of examination, with its dull, unhappy, "scribbling fools."

Lo! from quiet skies
In through the window my Lord the Sun!
And my eyes
Were dazzled and drunk with the misty gold,
.
.
.
.
.
And a full tumultuous murmur of wings
Grew through the hall;
And I knew the white undying Fire,
And, through open portals,
Gyre on gyre,
Archangels and angels, adoring, bowing,
And a Face unshaded . . .
Till the light faded;
And they were but fools again, fools unknowing,
Still scribbling, blear-eyed and stolid immortals.

There are at least two poems, "The Fish" and "Dining-Room Tea," in which imaginative power prevails over every other element; and if imagination be the supreme poetic quality, these are Rupert

Contemporary Poets

Brooke's finest achievement. They are, indeed, very remarkable and significant examples of modern poetry, both in conception and in treatment. In both pieces the subjects are of an extremely difficult character. One, that of "The Fish," is beyond the range of human experience altogether ; and the other is only just within it, and known, one supposes, to comparatively few. The imaginative flight is therefore bold : it is also lofty, rapid, and well sustained. In "The Fish " we see it creating a new material world, giving substance and credibility to a strange new order of sensation :

In a cool curving world he lies
And ripples with dark ecstasies.
The kind luxurious lapse and steal
Shapes all his universe to feel
And know and be ; the clinging stream
Closes his memory, glooms his dream,
Who lips the roots o' the shore, and glides
Superb on unreturning tides.

.
But there the night is close, and there
Darkness is cold and strange and bare ;
And the secret deeps are whisperless ;
And rhythm is all deliciousness ;
And joy is in the throbbing tide,
Whose intricate fingers beat and glide

Rupert Brooke

In felt bewildering harmonies
Of trembling touch ; and music is
The exquisite knocking of the blood.
Space is no more, under the mud ;
His bliss is older than the sun.
Silent and straight the waters run.
The lights, the cries, the willows dim,
And the dark tide are one with him.

We see, all through this poem (and the more convincingly as the whole of it is studied) the “fundamental brain-stuff” : the patient constructive force of intellect keeping pace with fancy every step of the way. So, too, with “Dining-Room Tea.” Imagination here is busy with an idea that is wild, elusive, intangible : on the bare edge, in fact, of sanity and consciousness. It is that momentary revelation, which comes once in a lifetime perhaps, of the reality within appearance. It comes suddenly, unheralded and unaccountable : it is gone again with the swiftness and terror of a lightning-flash. But in the fraction of a second that it endures, æons seem to pass and things unutterable to be revealed. Only a poet of undoubted genius could re-create such a moment, for on any lower plane either imagination would flag or intellect would be baffled, with results merely chaotic. And only to one whose quick and warm humanity

Contemporary Poets

held life's common things so dear could the vision shine out of such a homely scene. But therein Rupert Brooke shows so clearly as the poet of his day : that through the familiar joys of comradeship and laughter : through the simple concrete things of a material world—the “ pouring tea and cup and cloth,” Reality gleams eternal.

When you were there, and you, and you,
Happiness crowned the night ; I too,
Laughing and looking, one of all,
I watched the quivering lamplight fall

.

Flung all the dancing moments by
With jest and glitter. . . .

Till suddenly, and otherwhence,
I looked upon your innocence.
For lifted clear and still and strange
From the dark woven flow of change
Under a vast and starless sky
I saw the immortal moment lie.
One instant I, an instant, knew
As God knows all. And it and you
I, above Time, oh, blind ! could see
In witless immortality.

But the precise characteristic of this poetry is not one or other of these individual gifts. It is an intimate and subtle blending of them all, shot

Rupert Brooke

through and through with a gallant spirit which resolutely and gaily faces truth. From this brave and clear mentality comes a sense of fact which finds its artistic response in realism. Sometimes it will be found operating externally, on technique ; but more often, with truer art, it will wed truth of idea and form, in grace as well as candour. From its detachment and quick perception of incongruity comes a rare humour which can laugh, thoughtfully or derisively, even at itself. It will stand aside, watching its own exuberance with an ironic smile, as in "The One Before the Last." It will turn a penetrating glance on passion till the gaudy thing wilts and dies. It will pause at the height of life's keenest rapture to call to death an undaunted greeting :

Breathless, we flung us on the windy hill,
Laughed in the sun, and kissed the lovely grass.
You said, "Through glory and ecstasy we pass ;
Wind, sun, and earth remain, the birds sing still,
When we are old, are old. . . ." "And when we die
All's over that is ours ; and life burns on
Through other lovers, other lips," said I,
—"Heart of my heart, our heaven is now, is won !"

"We are Earth's best, that learnt her lesson here.
Life is our cry. We have kept the faith !" we said ;
"We shall go down with unreluctant tread
Rose-crowned into the darkness !" . . . Proud we were,

Contemporary Poets

And laughed, that had such brave true things to say
—And then you suddenly cried, and turned away

Perception so keen and fearless, piercing readily through the half-truths of life and art, has its own temptation to mere cleverness. Thence come the conceits of the sonnet called "He Wonders Whether to Praise or Blame Her," a bit of the deftest juggling with ideas and words. Thence, too, the allegorical brilliance of the "Funeral of Youth"; and the merry mockery of the piece called "Heaven." This is an excellent example of the poet's wit, as distinct from his richer, more pervasive, humour. It is very finely pointed and closely aimed in its satire of the Victorian religious attitude. And if we put aside an austerity which sees a shade of ungraciousness in it, we shall find it a richly entertaining bit of philosophy :

Fish say, they have their Stream and Pond ;
But is there anything Beyond ?
This life cannot be All, they swear,
For how unpleasant, if it were !
One may not doubt that, somehow, Good
Shall come of Water and of Mud ;
And, sure, the reverent eye must see
A Purpose in Liquidity.
We darkly know, by Faith we cry,
The future is not Wholly Dry.

Rupert Brooke

Mud unto Mud !—Death eddies near—
Not here the appointed End, not here !
But somewhere, beyond Space and Time,
Is wetter water, slimier slime !
.

And in that Heaven of all their wish,
There shall be no more land, say fish.

But, on the whole, one loves this work best when its genius is not shorn by the sterile spirit of derision. Its charm is greatest when the creative energy of it is outpoured through what is called personality. Never was a poet more lavish in the giving of himself, yielding up a rich and complex individuality with engaging ~~andour~~ ^{personality}. And poems will be found in which all its qualities are blended in a soft and intricate harmony. Passion is subdued to tenderness : imagination stoops to fantasy : thought, in so far as it is not content merely to shape the form of the work, is bent upon ideas that are wistful, or sad or ironic. Humour, standing aloof and quietly chuckling, will play mischievous pranks with people and things. A satirical imp will dart into a line and out again before you realize that he is there ; and all the time a clear-eyed, observing spirit will be watching and taking note with careful accuracy.

Of such is "The Old Vicarage, Grantchester," in

Contemporary Poets

which the poet is longing for his home in Cambridge-shire as he sits outside a café in Berlin. The poem is therefore a cry of homesickness, a modern "Oh, to be in England!" But there is much more in it than that; it is not merely a wail of emotion. The lyrical reverie which recalls all the sweet natural beauty that he is aching to return to is closely woven with other strands. So that one may catch half a dozen incidental impressions which pique the mind with contrasting effects and yet contribute to the prevailing sense of intolerable desire for home. Thus, when the poet has swung off into a sunny dream of the old house and garden, the watching sense of fact suddenly jogs him into consciousness that he is not there at all, but in a very different place. And that wakens the satiric spirit, so that an amusing interlude follows, summing up by implication much of the contrast between the English and German minds:

. . . *there* the dews
Are soft beneath a morn of gold.
Here tulips bloom as they are told;
Unkempt about those hedges blows
An English unofficial rose;
And there the unregulated sun
Slopes down to rest when day is done,
And wakes a vague unpunctual star,
A slippered Hesper; and there are

Rupert Brooke

Meads towards Haslingfield and Coton
Where *das Betreten's* not *verboten*.

εἴθε γενοίμην . . . would I were
In Grantchester, in Grantchester !—

He slips back again into the softer mood of memory, not of the immediate home scenes only, but of their associations, historical and academic. Always, however, that keen helmsman steers to the windward of sentimentality: better risk rough weather, it seems to say, than shipwreck on some lotus-island. And every time the boat would appear to be making fairly for an exquisite idyllic haven, she is headed into the breeze again. But though she gets a buffeting, and even threatens to capsize at one moment in boisterous jest, she comes serenely into port at last.

Say, do the elm-clumps greatly stand
Still guardians of that holy land ?
The chestnuts shade, in reverend dream,
The yet unacademic stream ?
Is dawn a secret shy and cold
Anadyomene, silver-gold ?
And sunset still a golden sea
From Haslingfield to Madingley ?
And after, ere the night is born,
Do hares come out about the corn ?
Oh, is the water sweet and cool,
Gentle and brown, above the pool ?

Contemporary Poets

And laughs the immortal river still
Under the mill, under the mill ?
Say, is there Beauty yet to find ?
And Certainty ? and Quiet kind ?
Deep meadows yet, for to forget
The lies, and truths, and pain ? . . . oh ! yet
Stands the Church clock at ten to three ?
And is there honey still for tea ?

William H. Davies

I SHOULD think that the work of Mr Davies is the nearest approach that the poetic genius could make to absolute simplicity. It is a wonderful thing, too, in its independence, its almost complete isolation from literary tradition and influence. People talk of Herrick in connexion with this poet ; and if they mean no more than to wonder at a resemblance which is a marvellous accident, one would run to join them in their happy amazement. But there is no evidence of direct influence, any more than by another token we could associate his realism with that of Crabbe. No, this is verse which has "growed," autochthonic if poetry ever were, unliterary, and spontaneous in the many senses of that word.

From that one fact alone, these seven small volumes of verse are a singular phenomenon. But they teem with interest of other kinds too. First and foremost there is, of course, the preciousness of many of the pieces they contain, as pure poetry, undimmed by any other consideration whatsoever. That applies to a fair proportion of this work ; and it is a delight-someness which, from its very independence of time and circumstance, one looks quite soberly to last the centuries through ; and if it lapse at all from

Contemporary Poets

favour, to be rediscovered two or three hundred years hence as we have rediscovered the poets of the seventeenth century.

It has, however, inherent interest apart from this æsthetic joy, something which catches and holds the mind, startling it with an apparent paradox. For this poetry, with its solitariness and absence of any affiliation ancient or modern, with its bird-note bubbling into song at some sweet impulse and seemingly careless of everything but the impelling rapture, is at the same time one of the grimmest pages out of contemporary life. In saying that, one pauses for a moment sternly to interrogate one's own impression. How much of this apparent paradox is due to knowledge derived from the author's astounding autobiography? Turn painfully back for a moment to the thoughts and feelings aroused by that book: recall the rage against the stupidity of life which brings genius to birth so carelessly, endowing it with appetites too strong for the will to tame and senses too acute for the mind to leash until the soul had been buffeted and the body maimed. And admit at once that such a tale, all the more for its quiet veracity, could not fail to influence one's attitude to this poetry. No doubt it is that which gives assurance, certainty, the proof of actual data, to the human record adumbrated

William H. Davies

in the poems. But the record is no less present *in* the poems. It often exists, implicit or explicit, in that part of the verse which sings because it must and for sheer love of itself. And in that other part of the work where the lyric note is not so clear : in the narrative poems and queer character-studies and little dramatic pieces, the record lives vivid and almost complete. Perhaps it is the nature of the record itself which denies full inspiration to those pieces : perhaps Mr Davies' lyric gift cannot find its most fitting expression in themes so grim : in any case it is clear that these personal pieces are not equal to the lighter songs.

Now if one's conscience were supple enough to accept those lighter songs as Mr Davies' complete work : if we could conveniently forget the autobiography, and when visualizing his output, call up some charming collected edition of the poems with the unsatisfactory ones carefully deleted, we could go on with our study easily and gaily. We might pause a moment to marvel at this 'isolated phenomenon' : we might even remark upon his detachment, not only from literature, but almost as completely from the ordinary concerns of life. That done, however, we should at once take a header into the delicious refreshment of the lyrics. Such a study would be very fascinating ; and from

Contemporary Poets

the standpoint of Art as Art, it might not be inadequate. But it would totally lack significance. Even from the point of view of pure poetry, the loss would be profound—not to realize that behind the blithest of these trills of song is a background as stormy as any winter sky behind a robin on a bare bough. There is this one, for example, from the volume called *Foliage* :

If I were gusty April now,
How I would blow at laughing Rose ;
I'd make her ribbons slip their knots,
And all her hair come loose.

If I were merry April now,
How I would pelt her cheeks with showers ;
I'd make carnations rich and warm,
Of her vermilion flowers.

Since she will laugh in April's face,
No matter how he rains or blows—
Then O that I wild April were,
To play with laughing Rose.

The gaiety of that, considered simply in its lightness of heart, its verbal and metrical felicity, is a delightful thing. And it recurs so frequently as to make Mr Davies quite the jolliest of modern poets. So if we are content to stop there, if we are not teased by an instinct to relate things, and see all round them, we may make holiday pleasantly enough with this part of the poet's work. The

William H. Davies

method is not really satisfying, however, and the inclusion of the more personal pieces adds a deeper value to the study. Not merely because the facts of a poet's life are interesting in themselves, but because here especially they are illuminating, explanatory, suggestive: connecting and unifying the philosophical interest of the work, and supplying a background, curiously impressive, for its art.

For that reason one would refuse to pass over in silence Mr Davies' first book of poems, *The Soul's Destroyer*, published in 1907. Not that it is perfect poetry: indeed, I doubt whether one really satisfying piece could be chosen from the whole fourteen. But it has deep human interest. The book is slim, sombre, almost insignificant in its paper wrappers. But its looks belie it. It is, in fact, nothing less than a flame of courage, a shining triumph of the spirit of humanity. Mr Shaw has made play with the facts of this poet's life, partly because 'it is his nature so to do,' and partly, one suspects, to hide a deeper feeling. But play as you will with the willing vagabondage, the happy irresponsibility, the weakness and excess and error of a wild youth, you will only film the surface of the tragedy. Underneath will remain those sullen questions—what is life about, what are our systems

Contemporary Poets

and our laws about, that a human creature and one with the miraculous spark of genius in him, is chased hungry and homeless up and down his own country, tossed from continent to continent and thrown up at last, broken and all but helpless, to be persecuted by some contemptible agent of charity and to wander from one crowded lodging-house to another, seeking vainly for a quiet corner in which to make his songs. The verses in *The Soul's Destroyer* were written under those conditions ; and by virtue of that it would seem that the drab little volume attains to spiritual magnificence.

The themes in this book and those of *New Poems*, published in the same year, are of that personal kind of which we have already spoken. But you will be quite wrong if you suppose that they are therefore gloomy. On the contrary, though there is an occasional didactic piece, like that which gives its title to the first volume, there is more often a vein of humour. Thus we have the astonishing catalogue of lodging-house humanity in "Saints and Lodgers" with the satirical flavour of its invocation :

Ye saints, that sing in rooms above,
Do ye want souls to consecrate ?

And there is "The Jolly Tramp," a scrap of autobiography, perhaps the least bit coloured :

William H. Davies

I am a jolly tramp : I whine to you,
Then whistles till I meet another fool.
I call the labourer sir, the boy young man,
The maid young lady, and the mother I
Will flatter through the youngest child that walks.

In "Wondering Brown" there is surely something unique in poetry : not alone in theme, and the extraordinary set of circumstances which enabled such a bit of life to be observed, by a poet, from the inside ; but in the rare quality of it, its sympathetic satire, the genial incisiveness of its criticism of life :

There came a man to sell his shirt,
A drunken man, in life low down ;
When Riley, who was sitting near,
Made use of these strange words to Brown.

" Yon fallen man, that's just gone past,
I knew in better days than these ;
Three shillings he could make a day,
As an adept at picking peas." .

" You'd scarcely credit it, I knew
A man in this same house, low down
Who owns a fish-shop now—believe
Me, or believe me not," said Brown.

" He was a civil sort of cove,
But did queer things, for one low down :
Oft have I watched him clean his teeth—
As true as Heaven's above !" cried Brown.

Contemporary Poets

This humorous quality is the most marked form of an attitude of detachment which may be observed in most of the personal pieces. So complete is this detachment sometimes, as in "Strange People" or "Scotty Bill" or "Facts," that one is tempted to a heresy. Is it possible, in view of this lightness of touch, this untroubled pace and coolness of word and phrase, that the poet did not see the implications of what he was recording, or seeing them, was not greatly moved by them? Now there are certain passages which prove that that doubt *is* a heresy: that the poet did perceive and feel the complete significance of the facts he was handling. Otherwise, of course, he were no poet. There is evidence of this in such a poem as "A Blind Child," from which I quote a couple of stanzas:

We're in the garden, where are bees
And flowers, and birds, and butterflies;
There is one greedy fledgling cries
For all the food his parent sees!

I see them all: flowers of all kind,
The sheep and cattle on the leas;
The houses up the hills, and trees—
But I am dumb, for she is blind.

There is, too, the last stanza of "Facts," a narrative piece which relates the infamous treatment by workhouse officials of an old and dying man:

William H. Davies

Since Jesus came with mercy and love,
'Tis nineteen hundred years and five :
They made that dying man break stones,
In faith that Christ is still alive.

A hideous scrap of notoriety for A.D. 1905 !—and proof enough to convince us of our author's humanity. At the same time, however, it is the fact that there is little sign of intense emotion in this work. One comes near it, perhaps, in a passage in "The Forsaken Dead," where the poet is musing in the burial-place of a deserted settlement, and breaks into wrath at the tyranny which drove the people out :

Had they no dreamer who might have remained
To sing for them these desolated scenes ?
One who might on a starvèd body take
Strong flights beyond the fiery larks in song,
With awful music, passionate with hate ?

But that is a rare example. Deep emotion is not a feature of Mr Davies' poetry : neither in the poems of life, which might be supposed to awaken it directly ; nor, stranger still, in the infrequent love poems ; nor in the lyrics of nature. It would be interesting to speculate on this, if there were any use in it—whether it is after all just a sign of excessive feeling, masked by restraint ; whether it may be in some way a reaction from a life of too

Contemporary Poets

much sensation ; or whether it simply means that emotion is nicely balanced by objective power. Perhaps an analysis would determine the question in the direction of a balance of power ; but the fact remains that though sensibility has a wide range, though it is quick, acute and tender, it is not intense.

It would be unfair, however, to suggest that these earlier volumes are only interesting on the personal side. The pure lyric note is uttered first here : once or twice in a small perfect song, as "The Likeness" and "Parted" ; but oftener in a snatch or a broken trill, as

He who loves Nature truly, hath
His wealth in her kind hands ; and it
Is in safe trust until his death,
Increasing as he uses it.

Or a passage from "Music," invoking the memory of childhood :

O happy days of childhood, when
We taught shy Echo in the glen
Words she had never used before—
Ere Age lost heart to summon her.
Life's river, with its early rush,
Falls into a mysterious hush
When nearing the eternal sea :
Yet we would not forgetful be,

William H. Davies

In these deep, silent days so wise,
Of shallows making mighty noise
When we were young, when we were gay,
And never thought Death lived—that day.

Or a fragment from “The Calm,” when the poet has been thinking of his “tempestuous past,” and contrasts it with his present well-being, and the country joys which he fears will be snatched away again :

But are these pleasant days to keep ?
Where shall I be when Summer comes ?
When, with a bee’s mouth closed, she hums
Sounds not to wake, but soft and deep,
To make her pretty charges sleep ?

The love of Nature which supplies the theme here is a characteristic that persists throughout the subsequent volumes. It recurs more and more frequently, until the autobiographical element is almost eliminated ; and just as it is the main motive of the later poetry, so it is its happiest inspiration. It is rather a pagan feeling, taking great joy in the beauty of the material world, revelling in the impressions of sight and scent, sound and taste and touch. It is humane enough to embrace the whole world of animal life ; but it seeks no spirit behind the phenomena of Nature, and cares precisely nothing about its more scientific aspect. Its gay

Contemporary Poets

lightsomeness is a charming thing to watch, an amazing thing to think about :

For Lord, how merry now am I !
Tickling with straw the butterfly,
Where she doth in her clean, white dress,
Sit on a green leaf, motionless,
To hear Bees hum away the hours.

Or again, from "Leisure," in *Songs of Joy* :

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

.

No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.

No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.

.

A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

And a "Greeting," from the volume called *Foliage* :

Good morning, Life—and all
Things glad and beautiful.
My pockets nothing hold,
But he that owns the gold,
The Sun, is my great friend—
His spending has no end.

William H. Davies

Hail to the morning sky,
Which bright clouds measure high ;
Hail to you birds whose throats
Would number leaves by notes ;
Hail to you shady bowers,
And you green fields of flowers.

The poet does not claim to be learned in nature lore : indeed he declares in one place that he does not know ‘ the barley from the oats.’ But he has a gift of fancy which often plays about his observation with delightful effect. One could hardly call it by so big a name as imagination : that suggests a height and power of vision which this work does not possess, and which one would not look for in this type of genius. It is a lighter quality, occasionally childlike in its naïveté, fantastical, graceful, even quaint. It is seen in simile sometimes, as this from *The Soul's Destroyer*, describing the sky :

It was a day of rest in heaven, which seemed
A blue grass field thick dotted with white tents
Which Life slept late in, though 'twere holiday.

Or this account of the origin of the Kingfisher, from “ Farewell to Poesy ” :

It was the Rainbow gave thee birth,
And left thee all her lovely hues ;
And, as her mother's name was Tears,
So runs it in thy blood to choose

Contemporary Poets

For haunts the lonely pools, and keep
In company with trees that weep.

Or a fancy about the sound of rain from *Nature Poems* :

I hear leaves drinking rain ;
I hear rich leaves on top
Giving the poor beneath
Drop after drop ;
'Tis a sweet noise to hear
Those green leaves drinking near.

It plays an important part too in the poems upon other favourite themes, on a woman's hair, on her voice, on music. Such are "Sweet Music" and "A Maiden and her Hair" in *Nature Poems* : as well as "The Flood," from which I quote. It will be found in *Songs of Joy* :

I thought my true love slept ;
Behind her chair I crept
And pulled out a long pin ;
The golden flood came out,
She shook it all about,
With both our faces in.

Ah ! little wren I know
Your mossy, small nest now
A windy, cold place is :
No eye can see my face,
Howe'er it watch the place
Where I half drown in bliss.

William H. Davies

A development of technique in the later work lends ease and precision to the poet's use of his instrument. Little faults of metre and of rhyme are corrected: banalities of phrase and crudities of thought almost disappear, so that the verse acquires a new grace. It gains, too, from a wider variety of form: for the verses may be as short as one foot, or as long as five: and there may be stanzas of only two lines, or anything up to eight. There are even pieces written in the closed couplet and in blank verse. But Mr Davies is by no means an innovator in his art, as so many of his contemporaries are. The variety we have noted is, after all, only a modification of traditional form and not a departure from it; and always as its basis, the almost constant unit is the iamb. Very rarely is any other measure adopted; and so well does the iamb suit the simple and direct nature of this work in thought, word and phrase, that one would not often alter it. One of the perfect examples of its fitness is in "The Battle," from *Nature Poems*:

There was a battle in her face,
~~Between a Lily and a Rose:~~
My Love would have the Lily win
And I the Lily lose.

I saw with joy that strife, first one,
And then the other uppermost;

Contemporary Poets

Until the Rose roused all its blood,
And then the Lily lost.

When she's alone, the Lily rules,
By her consent, without mistake :
But when I come that red Rose leaps
To battle for my sake.

Occasionally, however, and especially in the longer poems, the regular recurrence of the iamb is a little monotonous. Then a wish just peeps out that Mr Davies were more venturous: that he had some slight experimental turn, or that he did not stand quite so far aloof from the influences which, within his sight and hearing, are shaping a new kind of poetic expression. But the regret may be put aside. The fresh forms which those others are evolving are valid for them—for life as they conceive it—for the wider range and the more complex nature of the experience out of which they are distilling the poetic essence. For him, however, the lyric mood burns clear and untroubled, kindling directly to the beauty of simple and common things. And instinctively he seeks to embody it in cadence and measure which are sweetly familiar. When some exhilarating touch quickens and lightens his verse with a more tripping measure, as in "The Laughters" (from *Nature Poems*) its gay charm is irresistible.

William H. Davies

Mary and Maud have met at the door,
Oh, now for a din ; I told you so :
They're laughing at once with sweet, round mouths,
Laughing for what ? does anyone know ?

Is it known to the bird in the cage,
That shrieketh for joy his high top notes,
After a silence so long and grave—
What started at once those two sweet throats ?

Is it known to the Wind that takes
Advantage at once and comes right in ?
Is it known to the cock in the yard,
That crows—the cause of that merry din ?

Is it known to the babe that he shouts ?
Is it known to the old, purring cat ?
Is it known to the dog, that he barks
For joy—what Mary and Maud laugh at ?

Is it known to themselves ? It is not,
But beware of their great shining eyes ;
For Mary and Maud will soon, I swear,
Find cause to make far merrier cries.

It is hard to close even a slight study of Mr Davies' work without another glance at his originality. One hesitates to use that word, strained and tortured as it often is to express a dozen different meanings. It might be applied, in one sense or another, to nearly all our contemporary poets, with whom it seems to be an article of artistic faith to avoid like

Contemporary Poets

the plague any sign of being derivative. So, although their minds may be steeped in older poetry, they deliberately turn away from its influence, seeking inspiration in life itself. There is no doubt that they are building up a new kind of poetry, with values that sound strange perhaps to the unfamiliar ear, but which bid fair to enlarge the field for the poetic genius and enrich it permanently. But the crux of the question for us at this moment is the fact of effort, the deliberate endeavour which is made by those poets to escape from tradition. No sign of such an effort is visible in Mr Davies' work, and yet it is the most original of them all—the newest, freshest, and most spontaneous.

The reason lies, of course, in the qualities we have already noted. It is not entirely an external matter, as the influence of his career might lead us to believe. That has naturally played its part, making the substance of some of his verse almost unique ; and, more important still, guarding him from bookishness and leaving his mind free to receive and convey impressions at first hand. From this come the bracing freshness of his poetry, its naïveté of language, its apparent artlessness and unconscious charm. But the root of the matter lies deeper than that, mainly I think in the sincerity and simplicity which are the chief qualities of his genius.

William H. Davies

Both qualities are fundamental and constant, vitalizing the work and having a visible influence upon its form. For, on the one hand, we see that simplicity reflected not only in the thought, and themes, but in the language and the technique of this poetry ; while on the other hand there is a loyalty which is absolutely faithful to its own experience and the laws of its own nature.

Walter De La Mare

THERE is one sense in which this poet has never grown up, and we may, if we please, recapture our own childhood as we wander with him through his enchanted garden. And if it be true, as John Masefield says, that "the days that make us happy make us wise," it is blessed wisdom that should be ours at the end of our ramble. For see what a delightful place it is! Not one of your opulent, gorgeous gardens, with insolently well-groomed lawns and beds that teem with precious nurselings; but a much homelier region, and one of more elusive and delicate charm. Boundaries there are, for order and safe going, but they are hidden away in dancing foliage: and there are leafy paths which seem to wind into infinity, and corners where mystery lurks.

Some one is always sitting there,
In the little green orchard ;

.

When you are most alone,
All but the silence gone . . .
Some one is waiting and watching there,
In the little green orchard.

Flowers grow in the sunny spaces, and all the wild

Walter De La Mare

things that children love—primrose and pimpernel,
darnel and thorn ;

Teasle and tansy, meadowsweet,
Campion, toadflax, and rough hawksbit ;
Brown bee orchis, and Peals of Bells ;
Clover, burnet, and thyme. . . .

It is mostly a shadowy place however, not chill and gloomy, but arched with slender trees, through whose thin leafage slant the warm fingers of the sun, picking out clear, quickly-moving patterns upon the grass. The air is soft, the light is as mellow as a harvest moon, and the sounds of the outer world are subdued almost to silence. Nothing loud or strenuous disturbs the tranquillity : only the remote voices of happy children and friendly beasts and kind old people. Wonder lives here, but not fear ; smiles but not laughter ; tenderness but not passion. And the presiding genius of the spot is the poet's "Sleeping Cupid," sitting in the shade with his bare feet deep in the grass and the dew slowly gathering upon his curls : a cool and lovesome elf, softly dreaming of beauty in a quiet place.

So one might try to catch into tangible shape the spirit of this poetry, only to realize the impossibility of doing anything of the kind. But mere analysis would be equally futile ; for the essence of it is as

Contemporary Poets

subtle as air and as fluid as light ; and one is finally compelled, in the hope of conveying some impression of the nature of it, to fall back upon comparison. It is a clumsy method however, frequently doing violence to one or both of the poets compared ; and even when used discreetly, it often serves only to indicate a more or less obvious point of resemblance. But we must take the risk of that for the moment, and call out of memory the magical effect that is produced upon the mind by the reading of "Kubla Khan," or "Christabel" or "The Ancient Mariner." Very similar to that is the effect of Mr de la Mare's poetry. There is a difference, and its implications are important ; but the chief fact is that here, amongst this modern poetry of so different an order, you find work which seems like a lovely survival from the age of romance.

That is why one has the feeling that this poet has never grown up. Partly from a natural inclination, and partly from a deliberate plan (like that of Coleridge) to produce a certain kind of art, he has created a faëry, twilight world, a world of wonder and fantasy, which is the home of perpetual youth. He has never really lost that time when, as a little boy, he says that he listened to Martha telling her stories in the hazel glen. Martha, of 'the clear grey eyes' and the 'grave, small,

Walter De La Mare

lovely head' is surely a veritable handmaid of romance :

‘Once . . . once upon a time . . .

Like a dream you dream in the night,
Fairies and gnomes stole out
In the leaf-green light.

And her beauty far away
Would fade, as her voice ran on,
Till hazel and summer sun
And all were gone :—

All fordone and forgot ;
And like clouds in the height of the sky,
Our hearts stood still in the hush
Of an age gone by.

That hush, invoking a sense of remoteness in space and time, lies over all his work. It is as though, walking in the garden of this verse, a child flitted lightly before us with a finger raised in a gesture of silence. And it is not for nothing that his principal book is called *The Listeners*. Footfalls are light, and voices soft, and the wind is gentle : the noise of life is filtered to a whisper or a rustle or a sleepy murmur. It is a device, of course, as we quickly see if we peer too curiously at it : just a contrivance of the romantic artist to create ‘atmosphere.’ But it is so cunningly done that you never suspect

Contemporary Poets

the contriving ; and if you would gauge the skill of the poet in this direction, you should note that he is able to produce the desired effect in the broad light of day as well as in shadow and twilight. It is a more difficult achievement, and much rarer. Evening is the time that the poets generally choose to work this particular spell : though moonlight or starlight, dawn, sunset, and almost any degree of darkness will serve them. Sunlight alone, wide-eyed, penetrating and inquisitive, is inimical to their purpose. Yet Mr de la Mare, in a poem called "The Sleeper," succeeds in spinning this hush of wondering awe out of the full light of a summer day. A little girl (Ann, a charming and familiar figure in this poetry : at once a symbol of childhood and a very human child) runs into the house to her mother, and finds her asleep in her chair. That is all the 'plot' ; and it would be hard to find an incident slighter, simpler and more commonplace. But out of this homespun material the poet has somehow conjured an eerie, brooding, impalpable presence which steals upon us as it does upon the child in the quiet house until, like her, we want to creep quickly out again.

A sense of the supernatural, that constant component of the romantic temperament, is of the essence of this poetry. The manifestation of it is

Walter De La Mare

something more than a trick of technique, for it has its origin in the very nature of the poet's genius. In its simpler and more direct expression, it seems to spring out of the fearful joy which this type of mind experiences in contact with the strange and weird. Again, as in "The Witch," it may take the form of a bit of pure fantasy, transmitting the fascination which has already seized the poet with a lurking smile at its own absurdity. The opening stanzas tell of a tired old witch who sits down to rest by a churchyard wall ; and who, in jerking off her pack of charms, breaks the cord and spills them all out on the ground :

And out the dead came stumbling,
From every rift and crack,
Silent as moss, and plundered
The gaping pack.

They wish them, three times over,
Away they skip full soon
Bat and Mole and Leveret,
Under the rising moon.

Owl and Newt and Nightjar
They take their shapes and creep,
~~Silent~~ as churchyard lichen
~~While she squats asleep.~~

.

Contemporary Poets

Names may be writ ; and mounds rise ;
Purporting, Here be bones :
But empty is that churchyard
Of all save stones.

Owl and Newt and Nightjar,
Leveret, Bat and Mole
Haunt and call in the twilight,
Where she slept, poor soul.

But in its subtler forms the supernatural element of this poetry is more complex and more potent. And it would seem to have a definite relation to the poet's philosophy. Not that it is possible to trace an outline of systematic thought in work like this, where every constituent is milled and sifted to exquisite fineness and fused to perfect unity. But if we follow up a hint here and there, and correlate them with the author's prose fiction, we shall not be able to escape the suggestion of a mystical basis to the elusive witchery of so many of his poems. We shall see it to be rooted in an extreme sensitiveness to what are called 'psychic' influences : a sensitiveness through which he becomes, at one end of the scale, acutely aware of the presence of a surrounding spirit world ; and at the other, deeply sympathetic and tender to subhuman creatures.

No crude claim is made on behalf of any mystical

Walter De La Mare

creed ; and still less would one violate the fragile and mysterious charm of a poem like "The Listeners" by so-called interpretation. But placed beside "The Witch," it is clearly seen to treat the supernatural on a higher plane : it is, indeed, a piece of rare and delicate symbolism. There is no recourse to the ready appeal of the grotesque and the marvellous ; and although we find here all the 'machinery' of a sensational poem in the older romantic manner—the great empty house standing lonely in the forest, moonlight and silence, and a traveller knocking unheeded at the door—it is a very subtle blending of those elements which has gone to produce the peculiar effect of this piece. Twice the traveller knocks, crying : "Is there anybody there ?" but no answer comes :

. . . only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men :
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,
That goes down to the empty hall,
Harkening in an air stirred and shaken.
By the lonely Traveller's call—
And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
'Neath the starred and leafy sky ;

Contemporary Poets

For he suddenly smote on the door, even
Louder, and lifted his head :—
' Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word,' he said.

Running through the piece—and more clearly perceived when the whole poem is read—is the thread of melancholy which is inseparably woven into all the poet's work of this kind. And it, too, was a gift of his fairy-godmother when he was born, light in texture as a gossamer and spun out of the softest silk. Melancholy is almost too big a word to fit the thing it is, for there is no gloom in it. It is like the silvery, transparent cloud of thoughtfulness which passes for a moment over a happy face ; and it has something of the youthful trick of playing with the idea of sadness. Hence come the early studies of "Imogen" and "Ophelia," where the poet is so much in love with mournfulness that he revels in making perfect phrases about it.

Can death haunt silence with a silver sound ?
Can death, that hushes all music to a close,
Pluck one sweet wire scarce-audible that trembles,
As if a little child, called Purity,
Sang heedlessly on of his dear Imogen ?

But even when this verse approaches a degree nearer to the reality of pain it is still, as it were, a reflected emotion ; and there is no poignance in

Walter De La Mare

it. It is a winning echo of sorrowfulness, caught by one who has the habit of turning back to listen and look. Thus the studies of old age which we sometimes find here are drawn in the true romantic manner, with a sunset halo about them, and lightly shadowed by wistfulness and faint regret. And the thought of death, when it is allowed to enter, comes as caressingly as sleep. The little poem called "All That's Past," where the poet is thinking of how far down the roots of all things go, is only one example of many where melancholy is toned to the faintest strain of pensive sweetness :

Very old are the woods ;
And the buds that break
Out of the briar's boughs, '
When March winds wake, '
So old with their beauty are—
Oh, no man knows '
Through what wild centuries '
Roves back the rose. '

Very old are we men ;
Our dreams are tales
Told in dim Eden
By Eve's nightingales ;
We walk and whisper awhile,
But, the day gone by,
Silence and sleep like fields
Of amaranth lie.

Contemporary Poets

So we might continue to cull passages which represent one aspect or another of the specific quality of Mr de la Mare's poetry. The choice is embarrassingly rich, for there is remarkable unity of tone and technical perfection here. But there is a danger in the process, especially with work of so fine a grain; and one feels bound to repeat the warning that it is impossible to dissect its ultimate essence in this way. We can only come back to our comparison, and recalling the magical music of poems like "Arabia," "Queen Djenira," or "Voices"—in which all the characteristics noted are so intimately blended that it is impossible to disengage them—reiterate the fact that they possess the same inexplicable charm as the romantic work of Coleridge.

But that reminds us of the difference, and all that it implies. For, after all, this poet is a romanticist of the twentieth century, and not of the late eighteenth. It is true that his genius has surprisingly kept its youth (even more, that is to say, than the poet usually does); but it is a nonage which is clearly of this time and no other. The signs of this are clear enough. First and foremost, there is his humanity—in which perhaps all the others are included, and with which are certainly associated the simplicity and sincerity of his diction. It is as though the two famous principles on which

Walter De La Mare

the *Lyrical Ballads* were planned had in the fulness of time become united in the creative impulse of a single mind. That is not to charge Mr de la Mare with the combined weight of those two earlier giants, of course, but simply to observe the truth which Rupert Brooke expressed so finely when he said that the poetic spirit was coming back "to its wider home, the human heart." So that even a born romanticist like this cannot escape ; and into the chilly enchantment of an older manner warm sunlight streams and fresh airs blow.

Obvious links with the life-movement of his time are not lacking, though as mere external evidence they are relatively unimportant. Of such are the synthesis of poetry and science in "The Happy Encounter"; and the detachment suggested in "Keep Innocency," where the poet reveals a full consciousness of the gulf between romance and reality. But the influence goes deeper than that. It is because he is a child of his age that he has observed children so lovingly, and has wrought child-psychology into his verse with such wonderful accuracy. That also is why he calls so gently out of 'thin-strewn memory' such a homely figure as the shy old maid in her old-fashioned parlour ; and thence, too, comes the sympathy with toiling folk—considering them characteristically in the serene mood when their

Contemporary Poets

work is done—which underlies such pieces as “Old Susan” and “Old Ben”:

Sad is old Ben Thistlewaite,
Now his day is done,
And all his children
Far away are gone.

He sits beneath his jasmined porch,
His stick between his knees,
His eyes fixed vacant
On his moss-grown trees.

But as in pale high autumn skies
The swallows float and play,
His restless thoughts pass to and fro,
But nowhere stay.

Soft, on the morrow, they are gone ;
His garden then will be
Denser and shadier and greener,
Greener the moss-grown tree.

From the same humane temper come the poet's kindly feeling for animals and his affectionate understanding of them. Over and over again its positive aspect finds expression, either quaint, comical or tender. And twice at least the negative side of it appears, coming as near to rage at the wanton destruction of animal life as so mellow and balanced a nature would ever get. It is a significant

Walter De La Mare

fact that at such moments he takes refuge in his humour—that humour, at once rich and delicate, which is perhaps the most precious quality of this poetry, and which, growing from a free and sympathetic contact with life, holds the scale counterpoised to a nicety against the glamorous romantic sense. Thus we have this scrap of verse, lightly throwing off a mood of disgust in whimsical idiom :

I can't abear a Butcher,
I can't abide his meat,
The ugliest shop of all is his,
The ugliest in the street ;
Bakers' are warm, cobblers' dark,
Chemists' burn watery lights ;
But oh, the sawdust butcher's shop,
That ugliest of sights !

And thus in "Tit for Tat" we find this apostrophe to a certain Tom Noddy, just returning from a day of 'sport' with his gun over his shoulder :

Wonder I very much do, Tom Noddy,
If ever, when you are a-roam,
An Ogre from space will stoop a lean race,
And lug you home :

Lug you home over his fence, Tom Noddy,
Of thorn-stocks nine yards high,
With your bent knees strung round his old iron gun
And your head dan-dangling by :

Contemporary Poets

And hang you up stiff on a hook, Tom Noddy,
From a stone-cold pantry shelf,
Whence your eyes will glare in an empty stare,
Till you are cooked yourself !

The humour there, corresponding in degree to the indignation for which it is a veil, is relatively broad. There are many subtler forms of it, however, and one will be found in a charming piece which is apt to our present point. It is called "Nicholas Nye," and tells about an old donkey in an orchard. He is an unprepossessing creature, lame and worn-out : just a bit of animal jettison, thrown away here to end his days in peace. And the poet had a great friendship with him :

But a wonderful gumption was under his skin,
And a clear calm light in his eye,
And once in a while : he'd smile :—
Would Nicholas Nye.

Seem to be smiling at me, he would,
From his bush in the corner, of may,—
Bony and ownerless, widowed and worn,
Knobble-kneed, lonely and grey ;
And over the grass would seem to pass
'Neath the deep dark blue of the sky,
Something much better than words between me
And Nicholas Nye.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

THESE are a dozen books by this author, the work of about a dozen years. They began to appear in 1902 ; and they end, so far as the present survey is concerned, with poems that were published in the first half of 1914. They make a good pile, a considerable achievement in bulk alone ; and when they are read in sequence, they are found to represent a growing period in the poet's mind and art which corresponds to, and epitomises, the transition stage out of which English poetry is just passing. That is to say, in addition to the growth that one would expect—the ripening and development which would seem to be a normal process—there has occurred an unexpected thing : a complete change of ideal, with steady and rapid progress in the new direction. So that if Mr. Gibson's later books were compared directly with the early ones, they might appear to be by an entirely different hand. Place *Urlyn the Harper*—which was first published—beside a late play called *Womenkind* or a still more recent dramatic piece called *Bloodybush Edge* ; and the contrast will be complete. On the one hand there is all the charm of romance, in material and in manner—but very little else. On the other hand there is nothing to which the

Contemporary Poets

word charm will strictly apply ; an almost complete artistic austerity : but a profound and powerful study of human nature. On the one hand there is a dainty lyrical form appropriate to the theme : there are songs like this one, about the hopeless love of the minstrel for the young queen who is mated with an old harsh king :

I sang of lovers, and she praised my song,
The while the King looked on her with cold eyes,
And 'twixt them on the throne sat mailèd wrong.

I sang of Launcelot and Guenevere,
While in her face I saw old sorrows rise,
And throned between them cowered naked Fear.

I sang of Tristram and La Belle Isoud,
And how they fled the anger of King Mark
To live and love, deep sheltered in a wood.

Then bending low, she spake sad voiced and sweet,
The while grey terror crouched between them stark,
“ Sing now of Aucassin and Nicolette.”

The later work cannot be so readily illustrated : it is at once subtler and stronger, and depends more upon the effect of the whole than upon any single part. But for the sake of the contrast we may wrest a short passage out of its setting in *Bloodybush Edge*. A couple of tramps have met at night on

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

the Scottish border ; one is a cockney Londoner, a bad lot with something sinister about him and a touch of mystery. He has just stumbled out of the heather on to the road, cursing the darkness and the loneliness of the moor. The other, a Border man to whom night is beautiful and the wild landscape a familiar friend, protests that it is not dark, that the sky is 'all alive with little stars' :

TRAMP. . . . Stars !

Give me the lamps along the Old Kent Road ;

And I'm content to leave the stars to you.

They're well enough ; but hung a trifle high

For walking with clean boots. Now a lamp or so . . .

DICK. If it's so fine and brave, the Old Kent Road,

How is it you came to leave it ?

TRAMP. . . . I'd my reasons. . . .

But I was scared : the loneliness and all ;

The quietness, and the queer creepy noises ;

And something that I couldn't put a name to,

A kind of feeling in my marrow-bones,

As though the great black hills against the sky

Had come alive about me in the night,

And they were watching me ; as though I stood

Naked, in a big room, with blind men sitting,

Unseen, all round me, in the quiet darkness,

That was not dark to them. And all the stars

Were eyeing me ; and whisperings in the heather

Were like cold water trickling down my spine :

Contemporary Poets

Putting an early and a late book side by side in this way, the contrast is astonishing. And it is not an unfair method of comparison, because when the new ideal appears it strikes suddenly into the work, and sharply differentiates it at once from all that had been written before. Like the larger movement which it so aptly illustrates, the change is conscious, deliberate, and full of significance; and it is the cardinal fact in this author's poetical career. It marks the stage at which he came to grips with reality: when he brought his art into relation with life: when the making of poetic beauty as an end in itself could no longer content him; and the social conscience, already prompting contemporary thought, quickened in him too.

Humanity was the new ideal: humanity at bay and splendidly fighting. It appeared first in the two volumes of 1907 as dramatic studies from the lives of shepherd-folk. Four books had preceded these, in which the texture of the verse was woven of old romance and legend. Another book was yet to come, *The Web of Life*, in which the prettiness of that kind of romanticism would blossom into absolute beauty. But the new impulse grew from the date of *Stonefolds*; and when the first part of *Daily Bread* appeared, the impulse had become a reasoned principle. In the poem which prefaces

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

that volume it comes alive, realizing itself and finding utterance in terms which express much more than an individual experience. I quote it for that reason. The immediate thought has dignity and the personal note is engaging. There is, too, peculiar interest in the clarity and precision with which it speaks, albeit unconsciously, for the changing spirit in English poetry. But the final measure of the poem is the touch of universality that is latent within it. For here we have the expression of not only a law of development by which the poet must be bound, and not only a poetical synthesis of the most important intellectual movement of this generation, but an experience through which every soul must pass, if and when it claims its birthright in the human family.

As one, at midnight, wakened by the call
Of golden-plovers in their seaward flight,
Who lies and listens, as the clear notes fall
Through tingling silence of the frosty night—
Who lies and listens, till the last note fails,
And then, in fancy, faring with the flock
Far over slumbering hills and dreaming dales,
Soon hears the surges break on reef and rock ;
And, hearkening, till all sense of self is drowned
Within the mightier music of the deep,
No more remembers the sweet piping sound
That startled him from dull, undreaming sleep :

Contemporary Poets

So I, first waking from oblivion, heard,
With heart that kindled to the call of song,
The voice of young life, fluting like a bird,
And echoed that light liting ; till, ere long,
Lured onward by that happy, singing-flight,
I caught the stormy summons of the sea,
And dared the restless deeps that, day and night,
Surge with the life-song of humanity.

Being wise after the event, one can discover auguries of that change in the very early work. There is, for example, a group of little poems called *Faring South*, studied directly from peasant life in the south of France. They indicate that even at that time an awakening sympathy with toiling folk had begun to guide his observation ; and they are in any case a very different record of European travel from that of the mere poetaster. There are studies of a stonebreaker, a thresher, a ploughman ; there is a veracious little picture of a housemother, returning home at the end of market-day laden, tired and dusty ; but happy to be under her own vine-porch once more. And most interesting of all the group, there is a shepherd, the forerunner of robuster shepherds in later books, and evidently a figure which has for this author a special attraction.

With folded arms, against his staff he stands,
Sun-soaking, rapt, within the August blaze

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

The while his sheep with moving rustle graze
The lean, parched undergrowth of stubble lands.

Indifferent 'neath the low blue-laden sky
He gazes fearless in the eyes of noon ;
And earth, because he craves of her no boon,
Yields him deep-breasted, sun-steeped destiny.

But these characters are not living people, they are types rather than individuals, and idealized a little. They are, as it were, seen from a distance, in passing, and in a golden light. Years were to pass before knowledge and insight could envisage them completely and a dramatic sense could endow them with life. Meantime the more characteristic qualities of this early work were to develop independently. The lyrical power of it, in particular, was to enjoy its flowering time, revelling in the sweet melancholy of old unhappy love stories, in courts and rose-gardens, kings and queens, knights and ladies and lute-players. Perhaps the most charming examples in this kind are "The Songs of Queen Averlaine." Here are a couple of stanzas from one of them, in which the queen is brooding sadly over the thought of her lost love and lost youth :

Spring comes no more for me : though young March blow
To flame the larches, and from tree to tree

Contemporary Poets

The green fire leap, till all the woodland, glow—
Though every runnel, filled to overflow,
Bear sea-ward, loud and brown with melted snow,
Spring comes no more for me !
.

Spring comes no more for me : though May will shake
White flame of hawthorn over all the lea,
Till every thick-set hedge and tangled brake
Puts on fresh flower of beauty for her sake ;
Though all the world from winter-sleep awake,
Spring comes no more for me !

They are graceful songs, and their glamour will not fail so long as there remain lovers to read them. The critic is disarmed by their ingenuousness : he is constrained to take them as they stand, with their warmth and colour, their sweet music and the occasional flashes of observed truth (like the March runnels of this poem) which redeem them from total unreality. The reward lies close ahead. For even on this theme of love, and still in the lyric mood, sanity soon triumphs. It heralds its victory with a laugh, and the air is lightened at once from the scented gloom of romanticism. " Sing no more songs of lovers dead," it cries, sound and strong enough now to make fun of itself.

We are no lovers, pale with dreams,
Who languish by Lethean streams.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

Upon our bodies warm day gleams ;
And love that tingles warm and red
From sole of foot to crown of head
Is lord of all pale lovers dead !

The volume from which that stanza is taken, *The Web of Life*, contains this poet's finest lyrics. From the standpoint of art nothing that he has done—and he is always a scrupulous artist—can surpass it; and the seeker whose single quest is beauty, need go no further down the list of Mr Gibson's works. There are some perfect things in the book: poems like "Song," "The Mushroom Gatherers" and "The Silence," in which the early grace and felicity survive; and where the lyric ecstasy is deepened by thought and winged by emotion. In one sense, therefore, although this volume is only midway through the period we are concerned with, it has attained finality. We ought to pause on it. We see that it culminates and closes the 'happy singing-flight' with which this career began. We realize, too, that it has absolute value, as poetry, by virtue of which many a good judge might rank it higher than its remarkable successors. And, indeed, it is hard to break away from its spell. But when we judge *The Web of Life* relatively, when we place it back in the proper niche amongst its kindred volumes, its importance

Contemporary Poets

seems suddenly to dwindle. Beside the later books, it grows almost commonplace; we perceive its charm to be of the conventional kind of the whole order of regular English poetry to which it belongs. That is to say, though there is no sign that the work has been directly modelled upon the accredited poets of an earlier generation, it has characteristics which relate it to them and secure a place in the line of descent. There are pieces which remind us of Keats or the younger Tennyson. Here is a stanza from the poem called "Beauty" which might have been the inspiration of the whole book :

With her alone is immortality ;
For still men reverently
Adore within her shrine :
The sole immortal time has not cast down,
She wields a power yet more divine
Than when of old she rose from out the sea
Of night, with starry crown.
Though all things perish, Beauty never dies.

Or there are poems in which passion trembles under a fine restraint, as in "Friends" :

Yet, are we friends : the gods have granted this.
Withholding wine, they brimmed for us the cup
With cool, sweet waters, ever welling up,
That we might drink, and, drinking, dream of bliss.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

O gods, in your cold mercy, merciless,
Heed lest time raze your thrones ; and at the sign,
The cool, sweet-welling waters turn to wine ;
The spark to day, and dearth to bounteousness.

And there is the group of classical pieces at the end of the book, in which one regretfully passes over the flexible blank-verse of "Helen in Rhodos" and "The Mariners," to choose a still more characteristic passage from "A Lament for Helen":

Helen has fallen : she for whom Troy fell
Has fallen, even as the fallen towers.
O wanderers in dim fields of asphodel,
Who spilt for her the wine of earthly hours,
With you for evermore
By Lethe's darkling shore
Your souls' desire shall dwell.

.
But we who sojourn yet in earthly ways ;
How shall we sing, now Helen lieth dead ?
Break every lyre and burn the withered bays,
For song's sweet solace is with Helen fled.
Let sorrow's silence be
The only threnody
O'er beauty's fallen head.

But this book, which is so good an example of poetic art in the older English manner, is not Mr Gibson's distinguishing achievement. That came

Contemporary Poets

immediately afterwards, and was the outcome of the changed ideal which we have already noted. *The Web of Life* may be said to belong to a definite school—though to be sure its relation to that school is in affinity rather than actual resemblance. The books which follow have no such relation: they stand alone and refuse to be classified, either in subject or in form. And while the earlier work would seem to claim its author for the nineteenth century, in *Daily Bread* he is newborn a twentieth-century poet of full stature.

The most striking evidence of the change is in the subject-matter. *Daily Bread*, like *Fires*, is in three parts, and each of them contains six or seven pieces. There is thus a total of about forty poems, every one of which is created out of an episode from the lives of the working poor. Thus we find a young countryman, workless and destitute in a London garret, joined by his village sweetheart who refuses to leave him to starve alone. A farm labourer and his wife are rising wearily in the cold dawn to earn bread for the six sleeping children. There are miners and quarrymen in some of the many dangers of their calling, and their womenfolk enduring privation, suspense and bereavement with tireless courage. There is a stoker, dying from burns that he has sustained at the furnace, whose young wife

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

retorts with passionate bitterness to a hint of compensation :

Money . . . woman . . . money !

I want naught with their money.

I want my husband,

And my children's father.

Let them pitch all their money in the furnace

Where he . . .

I wouldn't touch a penny ;

'Twould burn my fingers.

Money . . .

For him !

There are fishermen in peril of the sea ; the printer, the watchman, the stonebreaker, the lighthouse-keeper, the riveter, the sailor, the shopkeeper ; there are school-children and factory girls ; outcasts, tramps and gipsies ; and a splendid company of women—mothers in childbirth and child-death, sisters, wives and sweethearts—more heroic in their obscure suffering and toil than the noblest figure of ancient tragedy. With deliberate intention, therefore, the poet has set himself to represent contemporary industrial life : the strata at the base of our civilization. He has, as it were, won free at a leap from illusion, from a dominant idealism, and the jealous, tyrannical instinct for mere beauty. Life is the inspiration now, and truth the objective. The facts of the workers' lives are carefully observed,

Contemporary Poets

realized in all their significance and faithfully recorded. Sympathy and penetration go hand in hand. Personal faults and follies, superstitions and vices, play their part in these little dramas, no less than the social wrongs under which the people labour. And the conception, in its balance and comprehensiveness, is really great; for while on the one hand there is an humiliating indictment of our civilization (implicit, of course, but none the less complete) on the other hand there is a proud vindication of the invincible human spirit.

Viewed steadily thus, by a poetic genius which has subdued the conventions of its art, such themes are shown to possess a latent but inalienable power to exalt the mind. They are therefore of the genuine stuff of art, needing only the formative touch of the poet to evoke beauty. And thus we find that although the normal process seems to have been reversed here: although the poet has sought truth first—in event, in character and in environment—beauty has been nevertheless attained; and of a type more vital and complete than that evoked by the statelier themes of tradition.

As might have been expected the new material and method have directly influenced form; and hence arises another distinction of these later works. The three parts of *Daily Bread* and the play called

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

Womenkind are the extreme example ; and their verse is probably unique in English poetry. It has been evolved out of the actual substance on which the poet is working ; directly moulded by the nature of the life that he has chosen to present. The poems here are dramatic ; and whether the element of dialogue or of narrative prevail, the language is always the living idiom of the persons who are speaking. It is nervous, supple, incisive : not, of course, with much variety or colour, since the vocabulary of such people could not be large and its colour might often be too crude for an artist's use. Selection has played its part, in words as in incidents ; but although anything in the nature of dialect has been avoided, we are convinced as we read that this is indeed the speech of labouring folk. We can even recognize, in a light touch such as an occasional vocative, that they are the sturdy folk of the North country. There is a dialogue called "On the Road" which illustrates that, as well as more important things. Just under the surface of it lies the problem of unemployment : a young couple forced to go on tramp, with their infant child, because the husband has lost his job. That, however, inheres in the episode : it is not emphasized, nor even formulated, as a problem. The appeal of the poem is in its fine delineation of

Contemporary Poets

character, the interplay of emotion, the rapid and telling dialogue—the pervasive humanitarian spirit ; and, once again, an exact and full perception of the woman's point of view. Mr Gibson is a poet of his time in this as well—in his large comprehension and generous acknowledgment of the feminine part in the scheme of things. I do not quote to illustrate that, because it is an almost constant factor in his work. But I give a passage in which the Northern flavour is distinctly perceptible, in addition to qualities which are limited to no locality—the kindliness of the poor to each other and their native courtesy. An old stone-breaker has just passed the starving couple by the roadside and, divining the extremity they are at, he turns back to them :

Fine morning, mate and mistress !
Might you be looking for a job, my lad ?
Well . . . there's a heap of stones to break, down yonder.
I was just on my way . . .
But I am old ;
And, maybe, a bit idle ;
And you look young,
And not afraid of work,
Or I'm an ill judge of a workman's hands.
And when the job's done, lad,
There'll be a shilling.

.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

Nay, but there's naught to thank me for.

I'm old ;

And I've no wife and children,

And so, don't need the shilling.

.

Well, the heap's down yonder—

There, at the turning.

Ah, the bonnie babe !

We had no children, mistress.

And what can any old man do with shillings,

With no one but himself to spend them on—

An idle, good-for-nothing, lone old man ?

The curious structure of the verse is apparent at a glance—the irregular pattern, the extreme variation in the length of the line, the absence of rhyme and the strange metrical effects. It is a new poetical instrument, having little outward resemblance to the grace and dignity of regular forms. Its unfamiliarity may displease the eye and the ear at first, but it is not long before we perceive the design which controls its apparent waywardness, and recognize its fitness to express the life that the poet has chosen to depict. For it suggests, as no rhyme or regular measure could, the ruggedness of this existence and the characteristic utterance of its people. No symmetrical verse, with its sense of something complete, precise and clear, could convey such an impression as this—of speech

Contemporary Poets

struggling against natural reticence to express the turmoil of thought and emotion in an untrained mind. Mr Gibson has invented a metrical form which admirably produces that effect, without condescending to a crude realism. He has made the worker articulate, supplying just the coherence and lucidity which art demands, but preserving, in this irregular outline, in the plain diction and simple phrasing, an acute sense of reality. Here is a fragment of conversation, one of many similar, in which this verse is found to be a perfect medium of the idea. A wife has been struck by her husband in a fit of passion : she has been trying to hide from her mother the cause of the blow, but she is still weak from the effects of it and has not lied skilfully. Her mother gently protests that she is trying to screen her husband :

Nay ! There's naught to screen.

'Twas I that . . . Nay !

And, if he's hot, at times,

You know he's much to try him ;

The racket that he works in, all day long,

Would wear the best of tempers.

Why, mother, who should know as well as you

How soon a riveter is done ?

The hammers break a man, before his time ;

And father was a shattered man at forty ;

And Philip's thirty-five ;

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

And if he's failed a bit . . .
And, sometimes, over-hasty,
Well, I am hasty, too ;
You know my temper ; no one knows it better.

Occasionally, it is true, the principle on which the verse is built is too strictly applied : the phraseology is abrupt beyond the required effect ; and the lines, instead of following a rule which seems to measure their length by a natural pause, are broken arbitrarily. Speaking broadly, however, it is beautifully fitted to the themes of *Daily Bread*, though one is not so sure about it in a poem like "Akra the Slave." This is a delightful narrative, akin in subject to the earlier work, and belonging to that period much more than to the date at which it was published, 1910. One cannot linger upon it, nor even upon the more important work which followed, and is happily still continuing—more important because it indicates development and marked progress along the new lines. The three parts of *Fires* carry forward the conception of *Daily Bread*, but now in narrative style, permitting therefore a relaxation of the austere dramatic truth of the dialogue form. The verse is modified accordingly, as will be seen in this passage from "The Shop" : A workman has entered his favourite shop—the little general-store of a poor neighbour-

Contemporary Poets

hood—to buy his evening paper. But he is not attended to immediately ; and a sickly little girl who has come for a fraction of a loaf and a screw of tea, is also waiting. The shopkeeper is engrossed with a parcel from the country—from a little convalescent son who has gone for the first time to his father's native place :

Next night, as I went in, I caught
A strange, fresh smell. The postman had just brought
A precious box from Cornwall, and the shop
Was lit with primroses, that lay atop
A Cornish pasty, and a pot of cream :
And as, with gentle hands, the father lifted
The flowers his little son had plucked for him,
He stood a moment in a far-off dream,
As though in glad remembrances he drifted
On Western seas : and, as his eyes grew dim,
He stooped, and buried them in deep, sweet bloom :
Till, hearing, once again, the poor child's cough,
He served her hurriedly, and sent her off,
Quite happily, with thin hands filled with flowers.
And, as I followed to the street, the gloom
Was starred with primroses ; and many hours
The strange, shy flickering surprise
Of that child's keen, enchanted eyes
Lit up my heart, and brightened my dull room.

Music has come in again, in frequent and sometimes intricate rhyme ; in metrical lightness and variety ; in a fuller and more harmonious language.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

The spirit of this later work remains humanitarian, but it is not concentrated now solely upon the tragic aspects of the workers' lives. A wider range is taken, and comedy enters, with an accession of urbanity from which characterization gains a mellower note. The world of nature, too, banished for a time in the exclusive study of humanity, returns to enrich this later poetry with a store of loving observation, an intimate knowledge of wild creatures, and the refreshing sense of a healthful open-air life in which, over a deep consciousness of sterner things, plays a jolly comradeship with wind and weather.

Ralph Hodgson

THE format of Mr Hodgson's published work is almost as interesting as the poetry itself—and that is saying a good deal. For all of his poetry that matters (there is an earlier, experimental volume which is not notable) has been issued during the past two or three years in the form of chapbook and broadside.

It was a new publishing venture, quietly launched *At the Sign of Flying Fame*, and piloted now through the rapids of a larger success by the Poetry Bookshop. In a sense, of course, it is not a new thing at all, but a revival of the means by which ballad and romance were conveyed into the hands of the people a couple of centuries ago. Yet it is no imitation of a quaint style for the sake of its picturesqueness, nor the haphazard choice of a vehicle unsuited either to the author or his public, nor a mere bid for popular favour.

The peculiar interest of the revival lies in the fact that it is part of the larger movement, the renascent spirit of poetry which has been visibly stirring the face of the waters in these past few years. The reappearance of the chapbook synchronized with that, and is closely related with it. For it is found to be as well fitted to the form

Ralph Hodgson

and the content of the newest poetry or the artistic to the need of the newest audience. it would be hand it brings to the freshly awakened out the book which is cheap enough to acquire susceptible, enough readily to become a familiar possessor, to the mind. On the other hand, it is suited preclining to the simple themes and metrical effects of all find work hitherto published in this form; and This designed only to include small poems of unquestioned excellence. Here may be perceived the more important factors which go to the formation of literary taste; and while one would estimate that the educational value of these little books is therefore high, aptly meeting the need of the novice in poetry, it is clear that the discriminating mind also is likely to find them satisfying.

Mr Hodgson's work, then, will be found in four chapbooks and a thin sheaf of broadsides. The chapbooks are small and slim, and could all be picked up between the thumb and finger of one hand. They are wrapped in cheery yellow and decorated with impressionistic sketches which, nine times out of ten, perhaps, really help the illusion that the poet is creating. The broadsides—there are about a dozen of them—are long loose sheets, each containing a single poem similarly decorated.

Temporary Poets

f the work is thus quite small. Perhaps
Ralph not more than five-and-twenty pieces
one very long, and amongst them an
T^{HE} miniature of a single stanza. Probably
it in which the author has chosen to appear
and an effect in restricting his production.
For it would be a possible result of the vigorous
early education exercised and the limits imposed in space
and style. But there are signs that he would
not have been in any case a ready writer—
the sense these lyrics convey of having waited
on inspiration until the veritable moment shone,
finding thought and feeling, imagination and tech-
nique, ripe to express it. And by those very
signs watchers knew and acclaimed this author
for a poet, despite the slender bulk of his
accomplishment, long before the Royal Society of
Literature had awarded to his work the *Polignac*
prize.

The two poems which gained the prize are "The
Bull" and "The Song of Honour." Each occupies
a whole chapbook to itself, and therefore must be
accounted, for this poet, of considerable length.
They are, indeed, the most important of his poems.
And if one does not immediately add that they are
also the most beautiful and the most charming,
the reason is something more than an aversion from

Ralph Hodgson

dogma and the superlative mood. For the artistic level of all this work is high, and it would be difficult, on a critical method, to single out the finest piece. The decision would be susceptible, even more than poetical judgments usually are, to mood and individual bias. One person, inclining to the smaller, gem-like forms of verse, will find pieces by Mr Hodgson to flatter his fancy. This poet has, indeed, a gift of concentrated expression, before which one is compelled to pause. There are tiny lyrics here which comprise immensities. The facile imp that lurks round every corner for the poor trader in words whispers 'epigram' as we read "Stupidity Street" or "The Mystery" or "Reason has Moons." But is the specific quality of these delicate creations really epigrammatic? No, it would appear to be something more gracious and more subtly blent with emotion; having implications that lead beyond the region of stark thought, and an impulse far other than to sharpen a sting. "Stupidity Street" is an example :

I saw with open eyes
Singing birds sweet
Sold in the shops
For the people to eat,
Sold in the shops of
Stupidity Street.

Contemporary Poets

I saw in vision
The worm in the wheat,
And in the shops nothing
For people to eat ;
Nothing for sale in
Stupidity Street.

Analysis of that will discover an anatomy complete enough to those who enjoy that kind of dissection. There are bones of logic and organic heat sufficient of themselves for wonder how the thing can be done in so small a compass. And the strong simple words, which articulate the idea so exactly, confirm the impression of something rounded and complete ; as though final expression had been reached and nothing remained behind. But as a fact there is much behind. One sees this perhaps a little more clearly in "The Mystery" :

He came and took me by the hand
Up to a red rose tree,
He kept His meaning to Himself
But gave a rose to me.

I did not pray Him to lay bare
The mystery to me,
Enough the rose was Heaven to smell,
And His own face to see.

Again the idea has been crystallized so cleanly out of the poetic matrix that one sees at first only its sharp, bright outline. Perhaps to the analyst it

Ralph Hodgson

would yield nothing more. But the simpler mind will surely feel, no matter how dimly, the presence of all the imaginings out of which it sprang, a small synthesis of the universe.

Here we touch the main feature of this poet's gift—his power to visualize, to make almost tangible, a poetic conception. So consummate is this power that it dominates other qualities and might almost cheat us into thinking that they did not exist. Thus we might not suspect this transparent verse of reflective depths; and of course, it is not intellectual poetry, specifically so-called. Yet reflection is implied everywhere; and occasionally it is a pure abstraction which gets itself embodied. The poem called "Time" illustrates this. In its opening line—"Time, you old Gipsy-man"—the idea swings into life in a figure which gains energy with every line. One positively sees this restless old man who has driven his caravan from end to end of the world and who cannot be persuaded to stay for bribe or entreaty. And it would be possible quite to forget the underlying thought did not the gravity of it peep between the incisive strokes of the third stanza.

Last week in Babylon,
Last night in Rome,
Morning, and in the crush
Under Paul's dome ;

Contemporary Poets

Under Paul's dial
You tighten your rein—
Only a moment,
And off once again ;
Off to some city
Now blind in the womb,
Off to another
Ere that's in the tomb.

So it is too with this poet's imagination. It deals perpetually with concrete imagery—as for instance when it pictures Eve :

Picking a dish of sweet
Berries and plums to eat,

or presents her, when the serpent is softly calling her name, as

Wondering, listening,
Listening, wondering,
Eve with a berry
Half-way to her lips.

Moreover, the poet does not in the least mind winging his fancy in a homely phrase. He is not afraid of an idiomatic touch, nor of pithy, vigorous words. His conception is vivid enough to bear rigorous treatment ; and in the same poem, " Eve," the serpent is found plotting the fall of humanity in these terms :

Ralph Hodgson

Now to get even and
Humble proud heaven and
Now was the moment or
Never at all.

And when his wiles have been successful, Eve's
feathered comrades, Titmouse and Jenny Wren,
make an indignant 'clatter':

How the birds rated him,
How they all hated him!
How they all pitied
Poor motherless Eve!

That is the nearest approach to fantasy which will be found in this poetry. There is nothing subtle or whimsical here: no half-lights or neutral tones or hints of meaning. This genius cannot fulfil itself in an 'airy nothing.' The imaginative power is too firmly controlled by a sense of fact to admit the bizarre and incredible; yet there can be no doubt of its creative force when one turns for a moment to either of the prize poems, and particularly to "The Bull." It would be hard to name a finer specimen of verse in which imagination, high and sustained, is seen to be operating through a purely sensuous medium. That is to say, moving in a region of fact, accurately observing and recording the phenomena of a real world, there is yet achieved an imaginative creation of great power—

Contemporary Poets

a bit of all-but-perfect art. Quotation will not serve to illustrate this, since the poem is an organic whole and a principal element of its perfection is its unity. One could, however, demonstrate over again from almost any line the poet's instinct for reality: as for example in the truth, quiet but unflinching, of his presentment of the cruelty inherent in his theme. The passages are almost too painful taken out of their context; and there may be some for whom they will rob the poem of complete beauty. But the same instinct may be observed visualizing, in strong light and rich colour and incisive movement, the teeming tropical world in which the old bull stands, sick, unkinged and left to die.

Cranes and gaudy parrots go
Up and down the burning sky;
Tree-top cats purr drowsily
In the dim-day green below;
And troops of monkeys, nutting, some,
All disputing, go and come;

.
And a dotted serpent curled
Round and round and round a tree,
Yellowing its greenery,
Keeps a watch on all the world,
All the world and this old bull
In the forest beautiful.

Ralph Hodgson

This poem is indeed very characteristic of its author's method. One perceives the thought behind (apart, of course, from the mental process of actual composition); and one realizes the magnitude of it. But again it is implicit only, and reflection on 'the flesh that dies,' on greatness fallen and worth condemned, hardly wins a couple of lines of direct expression.

In "The Song of Honour" it would seem for the moment as if all that were reversed. This poem is the re-creation of a spiritual experience, a hymn of adoration. It is entirely subjective in conception, and is strangely different therefore from the cool objectivity of "The Bull" or "Eve" or "Time." In them the poet is working so detachedly that there is even room for the play of gentle humour now and then. He is working with delight, indeed, and emotion warm enough, but with a joy that is wholly artistic, caring much more for the thing that he is making than for any single element of it. But in "The Song of Honour" it is evident that he cares immensely for his theme; and hence arise an ardour and intensity which are not present in the other poems. Moreover, the work is the interpretation of a vision, which would seem to imply a mystical quality only latent hitherto; and there is a rapture of utterance which is not found elsewhere.

Contemporary Poets

The apparent contrast has no reality however. It is possible to catch, though in subtle inflexions it is true, an undertone which runs below even the simplest and clearest of these lyrics. No doubt it is as quiet, as subdued, as it well could be—this soft, complex harmony flowing beneath the ringing measure. But one can distinguish a note here and a phrase there which point directly to the dominant theme of "The Song of Honour." There is a hint of it, for example, in "The Mystery," where the soul is imagined as standing, reverent but without fear, within the closed circle of the unknown, and joyfully content to accept as the pledge and symbol of that which it is unable to comprehend, the beauty of the material world. One may see in that a familiar attitude of the modern mind; the perception that there *is* a mystery, which somehow perpetually eludes the creeds and philosophies, but which seems to be attaining to gradual revelation and fulfilment in actual existence. A vision of the unity of that existence was the inspiration of this greater poem: a realization, momentary but dazzling, of the magnificence of being: of its joy, of its continuity, of the progression of life through countless forms of that which we call matter to an ultimate goal of supreme glory.

I do not say that any thesis, in those or kindred

Ralph Hodgson

terms, was the origin of this Song. I feel quite sure that it had no basis so abstract. It was born in a mood of exaltation, kindled perhaps by such an instant of flaming super-consciousness as may be observed in the spiritual experience of other contemporary poets. The moment of its inception is recorded in the opening of the poem :

I climbed a hill as light fell short,
And rooks came home in scramble sort,
And filled the trees and flapped and fought
And sang themselves to sleep ;

Silence fell upon the landscape as darkness came
and the stars shone out.

I heard no more of bird or bell,
The mastiff in a slumber fell,
I stared into the sky,
As wondering men have always done
Since beauty and the stars were one,
Though none so hard as I.

It seemed, so still the valleys were,
As if the whole world knelt at prayer,
Save me and me alone ;

So true is the poet to his impulse towards clarity and the concrete, so unerringly does he select the strong, familiar word with all its meaning clear on the face of it, that it is possible to regard the

Contemporary Poets

Song simply as a religious poem—a hymn of adoration to a Supreme Being :

I heard the universal choir,
The Sons of Light exalt their Sire
With universal song,
Earth's lowliest and loudest notes,
Her million times ten million throats
Exalt Him loud and long,

Pure religion the poem is, but its implications are broader than any creed. And, define it as we may, it remains suggestive of the most vital current of modern thought. For it takes its stand upon the solid earth, embraces reality and perceives in the material world itself that which is urging joyfully toward some manifestation of spiritual splendour. Thus the poet hears the Song rising from the very stocks and stones :

The everlasting pipe and flute
Of wind and sea and bird and brute,
And lips deaf men imagine mute
In wood and stone and clay,

The pæan is audible to him, too, from lowly creatures in whom life has not yet grown conscious, from the tiniest forms of being, from the most transient of physical phenomena.

The music of a lion strong
That shakes a hill a whole night long,

Ralph Hodgson

A hill as loud as he,
The twitter of a mouse among
Melodious greenery,
The ruby's and the rainbow's song,
The nightingale's—all three,
The song of life that wells and flows
From every leopard, lark and rose
And everything that gleams or goes
Lack-lustre in the sea.

But it is in humanity that the Song attains its fullest and noblest harmony. Out of the stuff of actual human life the spiritual essence is distilled, making the wraiths of a mystical imagination poor and pale by comparison.

I heard the hymn of being sound
From every well of honour found
In human sense and soul :
The song of poets when they write
The testament of Beautysprite
Upon a flying scroll,
The song of painters when they take
A burning brush for Beauty's sake
And limn her features whole—
.
.
.
.
The song of beggars when they throw
The crust of pity all men owe
To hungry sparrows in the snow,
Old beggars hungry too—
The song of kings of kingdoms when
They rise above their fortune men,
And crown themselves anew.—

Ford Madox Hueffer

THESE is a collected edition of Mr Hueffer's poetry published in that year of dreadful memory nineteen hundred and fourteen. It is a valuable possession. Its verse-content may not—of course it cannot—appeal in the same degree to all lovers of poetry. For reasons that we shall see, it is more liable than most poetic art to certain objections from those whose taste is already formed and who therefore, wittingly or unwittingly, have adopted a pet convention. They may boggle at a word or a phrase in terminology which is avowedly idiomatic. They may wince occasionally at a free rhyme or grow a little restive at the irregularities of a rhyme-scheme, or resent an abrupt change of rhythm in the middle of a stanza just as they believed they had begun to scan it correctly. If they are the least bit sentimental (and it is not many who have cast out, root and branch, the Anglo-Saxon vice) they will be chilled here and there by an ironic touch, repelled by an apparent levity, or irritated at the contiguity of subjects and ideas which seem inept and unrelated. The classicist will grumble that the unities are broken; the idealist will shudder at a bit of actuality; the formalist will eye certain new patterns with dis-

Ford Madox Hueffer

favour; and even the realist, with so much after his own heart, will be graceless enough to be impatient at recurrent signs of a romantic temperament.

So, in perhaps a dozen different ways, the literary person of as many different types may find that he is just hindered from complete enjoyment of what he nevertheless perceives to be beautiful work. If he be honest, however, and master of his moods, he will be ready to admit that it *is* beautiful, and that none of these objections invalidate the essential poetry of the book. That has its own winning and haunting qualities, quite strong enough to justify the claim that the volume is a valuable possession. That is to say, there is absolute beauty in it, considered simply as a work of art and judged only from the point of view of the conventional lover of poetry. There are other values however, immediate or potential. There is, for example, to the believer in Mr Hueffer's theory, promise of the power which his method would have upon all the good, kind, jolly, intelligent, but unliterary people, could they be induced to read poetry at all. As a mere corollary from the literary quibbles already named, one would expect such people to find this volume delightful—an expectation by no means daunted by the declared fate of earlier productions.

Contemporary Poets

One sees that the evident sincerity of the work, the attitude of that particular individuality to life, the free hand and the right instinct in the selection of incident, and the use of language that is homely and picturesque, ought to be potent attractions to the reader who frequently finds the older poetry stilted and artificial.

Moreover, so successful has the author's method been in many cases that even the *littérateur* must pause and think. He will observe how well the new artistry suits the new material; he will note the exhilaration of the final effect; and when, returning to his beloved poets of the last generation, he finds that some of their virtue seems to have fled meantime, he will ask himself whether the life of our time may not *demand* poetic presentation in some such form as this. Which is to say that he will probably be a convert to Mr Hueffer's impressionism.

That point is debatable, of course; but what will hardly be questioned, apart from the joy we frequently experience here in seeing a thing consummately done, is the importance of this work as an experiment. That is obviously another kind of value, with a touch of scientific interest added to the æsthetics. And the importance of the experiment is enhanced, or at any rate we realize

Ford Madox Hueffer

it more fully, from the fact that the poet has been generous enough to elaborate his theory in a preface. That is no euphemism, as other prefaces and theories of exasperating memory might seem to suggest. It is real generosity to give away the fundamentals of your art, to show as clearly as is done here the principles upon which you work and the exact means which are taken to give effect to them. It is courageous too, particularly when confessions are made which supply a key to personality. For the hostile critic is thus doubly armed. But the 'gentle reader' is armed too; and Mr Hueffer would seem to have been wise, even from the point of view of mere prudence, to take the risk.

The reader of this book then will find the poems doubly interesting in the light that the preface throws upon them. He may, of course, read and enjoy them without a single reference to it—that is the measure of their poetic value. Or, on the other hand, he may read the preface, brim full of stimulating ideas, without reference to the poetry. But the full significance of either can only be appreciated when they are taken in conjunction. For instance, we light upon this phrase indicating the material of the poet's art: "Modern life, so extraordinary, so hazy, so tenuous, with still such definite and concrete spots in it." It is a charming

Contemporary Poets

phrase, and from its own suggestiveness gently constrains one to think. But if we turn at once to the most considerable poem of the collection, "To All the Dead," we shall see our poet in the very act of recording the life that he visualizes in this way; and we shall see how remarkably the texture of the poem fits the description in the passage just quoted: "life hazy and tenuous, with such definite and concrete spots."

To tell the truth, haze is the first thing we see when observing the effect of this poem. It is pervasive too, and for a time nothing more is visible save two or three islets of concrete experience, projecting above it and appearing to float about in it, unstable and unrelated. This first effect is rather like that of a landscape in a light autumn ground-mist, which floats along the valley-meadows leaving tree-tops and hillsides clear. Or it is like trying to recollect what happened to you on a certain memorable day. The mood comes back readily enough, golden or sombre; but the events which induced it, or held it in check, or gave it so sudden a reverse only return reluctantly, one by one, and not even in their proper order; so that we have to puzzle them out and rearrange and fit them together before the right sequence appears.

Such is the main impression of "To All the Dead."

Ford Madox Hueffer

Only the artist has been at work here selecting his incidents with a keen eye and sensitive touch, brooding over them with a temperament of complex charm, and for all their apparent disjunction, relating and unifying them, as in life, with the subtlest and frailest of links. As a consequence, at a second glance the haze begins to lift, while at a third the whole landscape is visible, a prospect very rich and fair despite the ugly spots which the artist has not deigned to eliminate, and which, as a fact, he has deliberately retained.

But there is no doubt the first glance is puzzling. If one were not caught by the interest of those concrete spots it might even be tiresome, and one would probably not trouble to take the second glance. But they are so curious in themselves, and so boldly sketched, that we are arrested ; and the next moment the general design emerges. First the picture of the ancient Chinese queen—a Mongolian Helen—

With slanting eyes you would say were blind—
In a dead white face.

That, with its quaint strange setting and its suggestion of a guilty love story, is a thing to linger over for its own sake, apart from its apparent isolation. Nor do we fully realize till later (although

Contemporary Poets

something subtler than intelligence has already perceived it), that in this opening passage the theme has been stated, and that the key-note was struck in the line

She should have been dead nine thousand year. . . .

But we pass abruptly, in the second movement, to our own time and to the very heart of our own civilization. We are paying a call on a garrulous friend in the rue de la Paix. He is an American and therefore a philosopher; but as he descants on the 'nature of things,' doubtless in the beautiful English of the gentle American, we let our attention wander to things that touch us more sharply, to sights and sounds outside the window, each vividly perceived and clearly picked out, but all resolving themselves into a symbol, vaguely impressive, of the complicated whirl of life. And this passage again, with its satiric flavour and dexterity of execution, we are content to enjoy in its apparent detachment, until we glimpse the link which unites it to the larger interest of the whole.

The link with that ancient queen is in a flash of contrast—a couple of Chinese chiropodists, grinning from their lofty window at a *mannequin* on the opposite side of the street. And as the theme is developed, episodes which seem

Ford Madox Hueffer

irrelevant at first, are soon found to have their relation with the thought—of death and tragic passion—on which the poet is brooding. At a chance word dropped by the American host the confused and perplexing sights and sounds of the outer world vanish; and the philosophical lecture, droning hitherto just on the edge of consciousness, fades even out of hearing—

. . . I lost them

At the word "Sandusky." A landscape crossed them;
A scene no more nor less than a vision,
All clear and grey in the rue de la Paix.

He is seven years back in time and many hundreds of miles away, pushing up a North American river in a screaming, smoky steamer, between high banks crowned with forests of fir:

And suddenly we saw a beach—

A grey old beach and some old grey mounds
That seemed to silence the steamer's sounds;
So still and old and grey and ragged.
For there they lay, the tumuli, barrows,
The Indian graves. . . .

So, rather obliquely perhaps as to method, but with certainty of effect, we are prepared for the culmination in the third movement. The poet has fled from civilization and 'Modern Movements' to the upland heather of a high old mound above the town of Trêves. And here, on a late autumn

Contemporary Poets

evening, he lingers to think. He remembers that it is the eve of All Souls' Day; and remembers too that the mound on which he is seated is an old burying-place of great antiquity. In the cold and dark of his eerie perch, certain impressions of the last few days return to him, just those which have been subtly galling a secret wound and impelling him to flee—the tragedy of the Chinese queen, the vision of the old tumuli at Sandusky Bay, the unheeded platitudes of his friend—

. . . "From good to good,
And good to better you say we go."

(There's an owl overhead.) "You say that's so?"

My American friend of the rue de la Paix?

"Grow better and better from day to day."

Well, well I had a friend that's not a friend to-day;

Well, well, I had a love who's resting in the clay

Of a suburban cemetery.

One has felt all through that something weird is impending; but I am sure that no ghost-scene so curiously impressive as that which follows has ever been written before. It could not have been done, waiting as it was for the conjuncture of time and temperament and circumstance. But here it is, a thing essentially of our day; with its ironic mood, its new lore, its air of detachment, its glint of grim humour now and then, and its intense passion, both of love and of despair, which the

Ford Madox Hueffer

fugitive show of nonchalance does but serve to accentuate. Passion is the dominant note as the myriad wraiths of long-dead lovers crowd past the brooding figure in the darkness.

And so beside the woodland in the sheen
And shimmer of the dewlight, crescent moon
And dew wet leaves I heard the cry "Your lips !
Your lips ! Your lips." It shook me where I sat,
It shook me like a trembling, fearful reed,
The call of the dead. A multitudinous
And shadowy host glimmered and gleamed,
Face to face, eye to eye, heads thrown back, and lips
Drinking, drinking from lips, drinking from bosoms
The coldness of the dew—and all a gleam
Translucent, moonstruck as of moving glasses,
Gleams on dead hair, gleams on the white dead shoulders
Upon the backgrounds of black purple woods. . . .

That poem naturally comes first in a little study, because it is the most considerable in the collection, and again because it is the most characteristic. It is very convenient, too, for illustrating those theories of the preface, as for example, that the business of the poet is "the right appreciation of such facets of our own day as God will let us perceive . . . the putting of certain realities in certain aspects . . . the juxtaposition of varied and contrasting things . . . the genuine love and the faithful rendering of the received impression." But on æsthetic grounds

Contemporary Poets

one is not so sure of "To All the Dead" for the first place. Perhaps it tries to include too many facets of life—or death; perhaps we get a slight impression as regards technique that the poet is *consciously* experimenting; and there is a shade of morbidity haunting it. In many of the shorter pieces there is a nearer approach to perfection. "The Portrait," for instance, a symbolical picture of life, has only one flaw; a slight excess of a trick of repetition which is a weakness of our author. It is mere carping, however, to find fault with a piece which is so noble in idea and gracious in expression; and it seems a crime to spoil the lovely thing by mutilating it. But with a resemblance of theme, the poem is so strongly contrasted in manner with "To All the Dead" that one cannot resist quoting from it at this point. The idea, although great, is relatively simple: life, symbolized in the figure of a woman, seated upon a tomb in a sequestered graveyard. The mood is one of serene melancholy, not rising to passion or dropping to satire; and the gentle unity of thought and feeling leaves the mind free to receive the impression of beauty.

She sits upon a tombstone in the shade ;

Being life amid piled up remembrances
Of the tranquil dead.

Ford Madox Hueffer

... So she sits and waits.

And she rejoices us who pass her by,
And she rejoices those who here lie still,
And she makes glad the little wandering airs,
And doth make glad the shaken beams of light
That fall upon her forehead : all the world
Moves round her, sitting on forgotten tombs
And lighting in to-morrow.

That was written earlier than "To All the Dead," but, like the two songs which come immediately after it in this volume, and like the "Suabian Legend," it is amongst Mr Hueffer's best things. One precious quality is the temperament which pervades it—and the principal artistic significance of all this work is to have expressed so strikingly an exuberant and complex personality. Sensibility rules, perhaps; but reflective power is visibly present, with a vein of irony running below it, precipitated out of its own particular share of the bitterness that nobody escapes. In one aspect after another this individuality is revealed, and the changing moods are matched by changing forms. It follows that there are many varied measures here; and most of them have some new feature. A few are very irregular, and all are, of course, modelled to suit the author's impressionistic theory. And the fact that these forms are in the main so well adapted to their themes : that they are

Contemporary Poets

so successful in conveying the desired impression, is as much as to say that the poet has evolved a technique which perfectly suits his own genius. It may or it may not carry much further than that ; and the extent to which the new instrument would respond to other hands may be problematical. One would suppose that some of its qualities at least would be a permanent gain, particularly the larger range which brings within its compass so many fresh aspects of life on the one hand and on the other a richer idiom. But whether or no these are qualities which will pass into the substance of future poetry, there can be no question that life seen through this particular temperament is interpreted vividly by this method.

Thus we have the fulmination of "Süssmund's Address to an Unknown God"; violent, bitter, and unreasoned, the mere rage of weary mind and body against the goads of modern existence. Thus, in the "Canzone à la Sonata" as in "The Portrait" a single serious thought is rendered in grave unrhymed stanzas which have all the dignity of blank verse with something more than its usual vivacity ; and thus, too, in "From Inland," one of the exquisite pieces of the volume, the whole of a tragedy is suggested by the rapid sketching of two or three brief scenes. Again the verse is perfectly fitted to

Ford Madox Hueffer

the theme ; the sober rhythm matching the quietness of retrospect ; memory tenderly grieving in simple rhymes which vary their occurrence as emotion rises and falls.

. . . We two," I said,
"Have still the best to come." But you
Bowed down your brooding, silent head,
Patient and sad and still. . . .

. . . Dear !
What would I give to climb our down,
Where the wind hisses in each stalk
And, from the high brown crest to see,
Beyond the ancient, sea-grey town,
The sky-line of our foam-flecked sea ;
And, looking out to sea, to hear,
Ah ! Dear, once more your pleasant talk ;
And to go home as twilight falls
Along the old sea-walls !
The best to come ! The best ! The best !
One says the wildest things at times,
Merely for comfort. But—*The best !*

Again, in "Grey Matter" and "Thanks Whilst Unharnessing," the colloquial touch is right and sure. In the latter poem, the almost halting time of the opening lines clearly suggests the tired horse as he draws to a standstill in the early darkness of a winter evening : there is a quicker movement as the robin's note rings out ; the farmer's song is

Contemporary Poets

broken at intervals as he moves about the business of unharnessing, and when he stands at the open stable door, peering through the darkness at the robin on the thorn, the impression of relief from toil, of gratitude for home and rest, of simple kindness and humanity, is complete—

Small brother, flit in here, since all around
The frost hath gripped the ground ;
And oh ! I would not like to have you die.
We's help each other,
Little Brother Beady-eye.

One might continue to cite examples : the rapid unrhymed dialogue of " Grey Matter," which continues so long as there is a touch of controversy in the talk of husband and wife, and changes to a lyric measure as emotion rises ; the real childlikeness of the " Children's Song " ; or the mingled pain and sweetness of " To Christina at Nightfall," epitomising life in its philosophy and reflecting it in its art. But it is unnecessary to go further ; and this last little poem (I will not do it violence by extracting any part of it) is perhaps the most complete vindication of our poet's theories. Never surely were impressions so vivid conveyed with a touch at once so firm and tender ; never were thought and feeling so intense rendered with such gracious homeliness.

An Irish Group

THE spirit of poetry is native to Ireland. It awakened there in the early dawn, and has hardly slumbered in two thousand years. Probably before the Christian era it had become vocal ; and as long as twelve hundred years ago it had woven for the garment of its thought an intricate and subtle prosody. You would think it had grown old in so great a time. You would almost expect to find, in these latter days, a pale and mournful wraith of poetry in the green isle. You would look for the symbol of it in the figure of some poor old woman, like the legendary Kathleen ni Houlihan, who is supposed to incarnate the spirit of the country. But even while you are looking it will happen with you as it happened before the eyes of the lad in the play by Mr Yeats. The bent form will straighten and the old limbs become lithe and free, the eyes will sparkle and the cheeks flush and the head be proudly lifted. And when you are asked, "Did you see an old woman ?" you will answer with the boy in the play :

I did not ; but I saw a young girl, and she had
the walk of a queen.

So it is with the later poetry of Ireland. One

Contemporary Poets

would not guess, in the more recent lyrics, that these singers are the heirs of a great antiquity. Their songs are as fresh as a blade of grass : they are as new as a spring morning, as young and sweet as field flowers in May. They partake of youth in their essence ; and they would seem to proceed from that strain in the Irish nature which has always adored the young and beautiful, and which dreamed, many centuries ago, a pagan paradise of immortal youth which has never lost its glamour :

Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue.

Doubtless we owe this air of newness largely to the rebirth of literature in the Isle. When we say that poetry has never slumbered there, we get as near to the truth as is possible ; it seems always to have been quick, eager and spontaneous, and never to have drowsed or faded. But there was a black age when it was smitten so hard by external misfortune that it nearly died. It was early in the nineteenth century when, as Dr Hyde tells, "The old literary life of Ireland may be said to come to a close amidst the horrors of famine, fever and emigration." All that Dr Hyde and Lady Gregory have done to build up the new literary life of their

An Irish Group

land cannot be fully realized yet. But out of their labours has surely sprung the movement which we call the Irish Literary Renaissance—a movement in which, disregarding cross currents, the detached observer would include the whole revival, whether popular or æsthetic. By fostering the Gaelic they have awakened in the people themselves a sense of the dignity of their own language and literature. By the translation of saga and romance, the patient gathering of folk-tale and fairy-lore, the search for and interpretation of old manuscripts, they have given to native poets a mass of material which is peculiarly suited to their genius. And since approximately the year 1890 they have seen their reward in the work of a band of brilliant writers. Romance is re-born in the novel; the poetry of the old saga blooms again in the lyric; and a healthy new development has given to Ireland what she never before possessed—a native drama.

Now it is true that the larger figures of the movement have receded a little; the one in whom the flame of genius burned most fiercely has passed into silence. And Synge being gone, there is no hand like his, cunning to modulate upon every string of the harp. There is no voice of so full a compass, booming out of tragic depths or shrilling satiric laughter or sweet with heroic romance;

Contemporary Poets

breathing essential poetry and yet rich with the comedy of life. It is a fact to make us grieve the more for that untimely end, but it is not a cause for despair. For there are many legatees of the genius of Synge. They are slighter figures—naturally so, at this stage of their career—but they belong, as he did, to the new birth of the nation's genius and they draw their inspiration directly from their own land.

Here we touch a constant feature of Irish poetry. Dr. Hyde tells that from the earliest times the bards were imbued with the spirit of nationality : that their themes were always of native gods and heroes, and that they were, in a sense, the guardians of national existence. The singers of a later day curiously resemble them in this. Sometimes it is a matter of outward likeness only, the new poets having drawn directly upon the stories which have been placed in their hands from the old saga. But much more often it is a rooted affinity—a thing of blood and nerve and mental fibre. Then, although the gods may bear another name and the heroes be of a newer breed and the national ideal may be enlarged, it is still with these things that the poets are preoccupied.

This has become to the scoffer a matter of jest, and to the grumbler a cause of complaint—that the

An Irish Group

Irish poet is obsessed by race. They say that they can guess beforehand what will be the mood, the manner and the subject of nine Irish poems out of ten. They are very clever people, so they probably could get somewhere near the mark. And they would naturally find themselves cramped in these narrow bounds. Religion and history and national ideals would give them no scope. But when they maintain that this is a radical defect, I am not at all convinced. I remember that many of the world's great books proceeded from an intense national self-consciousness; and I ask myself whether it may not be a law in the literary evolution of a people, as well as in their political development, that they proceed by way of a strong, free and proud spirit of nationality to something wider. The reply may be that that is a relatively early stage through which, in a normal literary progress, Ireland should have passed long since. True, but normal growth and advance have never been possible to her; and recalling the events of her history, it is something of a marvel that the literary genius should have survived at all.

In contrast with modern English poetry, impatient as it is to escape from tradition, these traits which mark a line of descent so clearly are the more striking. One may even smile a little at them—

Contemporary Poets

whimsically, as we do when we see a youth or a young girl reproducing the very looks and tones and gestures of an older generation. There is something comical in the unconscious exactitude of it. But the laugh comes out of the deeper sources of comedy. There lies below it, subconsciously perhaps, a profound sense of those things in life which are most precious and most enduring.

One of the gayer features of this family likeness is the persistence of a certain kind of satire. We know from Dr Hyde's *Literary History of Ireland* that an important function of the ancient bards was to satirize the rivals and enemies of their chieftain. They had, of course, to sing his victories, to inspire and encourage his warriors and to weave into verse the hundreds of romances which had come down to them from times older still. But their equipment was not complete unless it included a good stinging power of ridicule; and the *ollamb*, or chief bard, was commonly required to castigate in this way the king of some other province who happened to have given offence. But it is not to be supposed that the rival *ollamb* would remain silent under the punishment inflicted on his lord; and one can imagine the battle of wits which would follow. Or, if we need any assurance as to the caustic power of the bard, it may be found in one quaint

An Irish Group

incident. The hero Cuchulain was ranged against Queen Maeve of Connacht in her famous raid into Ulster about the year 100 B.C. Maeve was astute as well as warlike, and when she had failed several times to induce Cuchulain to engage singly with one of her warriors, she sent to him a threat that her bards "would criticize, satirize and blemish him so that they would raise three blisters on his face" . . . and Cuchulain instantly consented to her wish.

I cannot guess how many blisters have been raised by Irish satirists since that date, but I know the art has not died out. There are modern practitioners of it. Synge made the national susceptibility smart ; and yet his satire, to the mere onlooker, would seem sympathetic enough. So, too, with Miss Susan Mitchell. She pokes fun at her compatriots with perfect good humour and we cannot believe that they would be annoyed by it. But you never can tell. Perhaps the witty philosophy of "The Second Battle of the Boyne" would not appeal to an Ulster Volunteer ; and it is conceivable that even a Nationalist might resent the sly shaft at the national pugnacity. The opening stanza tells about an old man, whose name of portent is Edward Carson MacIntyre. His little grandchild runs in to him from the field carrying a dark round thing

Contemporary Poets

that she has found, and she trundles it along the floor to the old man's feet.

Now Edward Carson MacIntyre

Was old, his eyes were dim,

But when he heard the crackling sound,

New life returned to him.

"Some tax-collector's skull," he swore,

"We used to crack them by the score."

"Why did you crack them, grandpapa ? "

Said wee Victoria May ;

"It surely was a wicked thing

These hapless men to slay."

"The cause I have forgot," said Mac,

"All I remember is the crack."

.

"And some men said the Government

Were very much to blame ;

And I myself," says MacIntyre,

"Got my own share of fame.

"I don't know why we fought," says he,

"But 'twas the devil of a spree."

Again it is possible (though hardly probable one would think) that Mr George Moore does not really enjoy the fun so cleverly poked at him in the stanzas, "George Moore Comes to Ireland." Safe in our own detachment, the criticism seems delicious, brightly hitting off the personality which has grown so familiar in Mr Moore's work, and especially in

An Irish Group

“Hail and Farewell”: the delightful garrulity, the disconcerting candour, the intimacy and naïve egoism, and the perfectly transparent what-a-terror-I-was-in-my-youth air. The speaker in the poem is, of course, Mr Moore himself; and it will be seen how cunningly the author has caught his attitude, particularly to the work of Mr W. B. Yeats—

I haven't tried potato cake or Irish stew as yet ;
I've lived on eggs and bacon, and striven to forget
A naughty past of ortolan and frothy omelette.

But W. B. was the boy for me—he of the dim, wan
clothes ;
And—don't let on I said it—not above a bit of pose ;
And they call his writing literature, as everybody knows.

If you like a stir, or want a stage, or would admirèd be,
Prepare with care a naughty past, and then repent like
me.

My past, alas ! was blameless, but this the world won't
see.

When Miss Mitchell's satire is engaged on personalities in this way, it has a piquancy which may obscure the subtler flavour of it. But the truth is that it is often literary in a double sense, both in subject and in treatment. So we may find a theme of considerable general interest in the world of

Contemporary Poets

literature, treated in the allusive literary manner which has so much charm for the booklover. And to that is added a racy and vigorous satirical touch. Thus, for instance, is the question of Synge's *Playboy* handled. Ridicule is thrown on the stupid rage with which it was received, and on the folly which generalized so hotly from the play to the nation, deducing wild nonsense against a whole people and its literature because the man who killed his father in the story is befriended by peasants. Here is a snatch of it :

I can't love Plato any more
Because a man called Sophocles,
Who lived in distant Attica,
Wrote a great drama *Ædipus*,
About a Greek who killed his da.
I know now Plato was a sham,
And Socrates I brush aside,
For Phidias I don't care a damn,
For every Greek's a parricide.

So, too, comes the burlesque touch in the "Ode to the British Empire" :

God of the Irish Protestant,
Lord of our proud Ascendancy,
Soon there'll be none of us extant,
We want a few plain words with thee.
Thou know'st our hearts are always set
On what we get, on what we get.

An Irish Group

The genial temper of this work pervades even the political pieces. Miss Mitchell is no respecter of persons or institutions : she finds food for derision in friend as well as foe. But her laughter is not bitter—unless, perhaps, a tinge comes in when she touches that old source of bitterness, the gulf between the Saxon and the Celt—

We are a pleasant people, the laugh upon our lip
Gives answer back to your laugh in gay good fellowship ;
We dance unto your piping, we weep when you want
tears ;
Wear a clown's dress to please you, and to your friendly
jeers
Turn up a broad fool's face and wave a flag of green—
But the naked heart of Ireland, who, who has ever seen ?

There is, however, a more important strain of heredity in the new Irish poetry ; and it comes directly through the renaissance of which we have already spoken. There are two lines of development which begin in that rebirth ; but they proceed almost at right angles from each other. One, the clearer and more direct, is towards work of a specifically literary order. The other is tending to a simple and direct rendering of life. On the one hand we find poetry which is romantic in manner and heroic in theme. This is largely of narrative form, and seems to hold within it the promise of

Contemporary Poets

epic growth. On the other hand, there is a lyric form of less pretension and wilder grace ; music so fresh and apparently artless as to mock the idea of derivation. Yet it, too, owes its vitality to the same impulse, and is, perhaps, its healthiest blossoming.

The treasury of Irish romance has been eagerly drawn upon by the literary poet ; and splendid stories they are for his purpose. Every one by this time knows the incomparable Deirdre legend, in one or other of the fine versions by Mr Yeats, Mr Trench or Synge. Deirdre, as a heroine of the ancient world, positively shines beside a Helen or a Cleopatra. In her is crystallized the Celtic conception of womanhood, with her free, clean, brave, generous soul ; magnificently choosing her true mate rather than wed the High King Conchubar ; and with her lover magnificently paying the penalty of death.

We have become almost as familiar, too, with the Hosting of Maeve, the prowess of Cuchulain, and the mythological figures of Dagda and Dana, who are the Zeus and Hera of early Irish religion. Here is a fragment of a poem by Mr James Cousins called "The Marriage of Lir and Niav." The personages of the story belong to very early myth. To find Lir you must go back past the heroes and the demigods : further still, past the gods themselves, to their ancestors. For Lir was the father

An Irish Group

of Mananan the sea-god ; and he was the Lord of the Seven Isles. Niav (or Niamh) is described as the Aphrodite of Irish myth ; which probably accounts for the symbolism in the passage where Lir first sees her—

But, as upon the breathless hour of eve,
The gentle moon, smiling amid the wreck
And splendid remnant of the flaming feast
Wherewith Day's lord had sated half the world,
Sets a cool hand on the tumultuous waves,
And soothes them into peace, and takes the throne,
And beams white love that wakens soft desire
In waiting hearts ; so in that throbbing pause
Came Niav, daughter of the King whose name
May not be named till First and Last are one.

. . . And He who stood

Unseen, apart, marked how about Her form,
Clothed white as foam, Her sea-green girdle hung
Like mermaid weed, and how within her wake
There came the sound and odour of the sea,
The swift and silent stroke of unseen wings,
And little happy cries of mating birds ;

This poem appeared in one of Mr Cousins' earlier books, *The Quest*, published in 1904 ; and it is interesting to observe in it the little signs which indicate the nearness of the poet at that time to the source of his inspiration. The stories from the three great national cycles of romance had been made accessible in the years just preceding ; and the

Contemporary Poets

poetic imagination seems to have been charmed by their quaint manner as well as stimulated by their vigour. Hence we find in this poem one or two familiar epic devices which have apparently been adopted as a means to catch the tone of the old story, and to convey a sense of its antiquity. There is, for instance, the trick of repetition that we know so well, a whole phrase recurring, either word for word or varied very slightly, at certain intervals through the poem. Thus we have the phrase which appears in the passage quoted above, and which is several times repeated in other places—

—the King whose name

May not be named till First and Last are one.

Thus, too, we find the frequent use of simile of an involved and elaborate order. Mr Cousins reveals himself as poet and artist in this device alone. Imagination and mastery of technique are alike implied in fancies so beautifully wrought. The opening lines of the passage we have given supply an example, and another may be taken from “*Etain the Beloved*.” It is simpler than most, but it illustrates very aptly the grace of idea and expression which is characteristic of this poet. The scene is an assembly of the people before King Eochaidh; and the chief bard is presenting their urgent petition to him—

An Irish Group

He ceased, and all the faces of the crowd
Shone with the light that kindles when the boon
Of speech has eased the heart ; as when a cloud
Falls from the labouring shoulder of the moon,
And all the world stands smiling silver-browed.

In the same poem of Etain we may note the free use of description and the rich colour and profuse detail which mark romantic work of this kind. The story of Etain has a mythological association. She was the beloved wife of Mider, one of the ancient gods ; but she seems to have been driven out of the hierarchy and to have become incarnate in the form of a young girl of great beauty. King Eochiadh, not knowing of her divine origin, wooed her and made her queen. But Mider followed her to earth and won her back from her human lover. There is an exquisite stanza in which the King sends to seek for his bride, and tells how they will find her—

“ She shall be found in some most quiet place
Where Beauty sits all day beside her knee
And looks with happy envy on her face ;
Where Virtue blushes, her own guilt to see,
And Grace learns new, sweet meanings from her grace ;
Where all that ever was or will be wise
Pales at the burning wisdom of her eyes.”

News is brought to the King that Etain is found, and he goes to the remote and lonely place that

Contemporary Poets

his messengers have told him of. He comes upon her unaware—

There by the sea, Etain his destined bride
Sat unabashed, unwitting of the sight
Of him who gazed upon her gleaming side,
Fair as the snowfall of a single night ;
Her arms like foam upon the flowing tide ;
Her curd-white limbs in all their beauty bare,
Straight as the rule of Dagda's carpenter.

There is, too, in this poetry of Mr Cousins, a very tender feeling for Nature. Perhaps it does not quite accord with the spirit of the wild time out of which the stories came ; but that opens up a larger question into which we are not bound to enter. For if we are going to quarrel with the treatment of epic material in any but the vigorous, ' primitive ' manner, we shall make ourselves the poorer by rejecting much beautiful poetry. We may even find ourselves robbed of Virgilian sweetness. But most of us will be wise enough to take good things wherever we find them ; and may, therefore, rejoice in stanzas like these, which describe the stirring of wild creatures at dawn :

Somewhere the snipe now taps his tiny drum ;
The moth goes fluttering upward from the heath ;
And where no lightest foot unmarked may come,
The rabbit, tiptoe, plies his shiny teeth
On luscious herbage ; and with strident hum

An Irish Group

The yellow bees, blustering from flower to flower,
Scatter from dew-filled cups a sparkling shower.

The meadowsweet shakes out its feathery mass ;
And rumorous winds, that stir the silent eaves,
Bearing abroad faint perfumes as they pass,
Thrill with some wondrous tale the fluttering leaves,
And whisper secretly along the grass
Where gossamers, for day's triumphal march,
Hang out from blade to blade their diamond arch.

There is, however, a very different manner in which these early legends are being treated by some of the Irish poets. One may call it 'Celtic,' in the hope of conveying some impression of it in a single word. But if you would get nearer than that, you may take one or two fragments from Mr Yeats' *The Celtic Twilight*—such as "the voice of Celtic sadness and of Celtic longing for infinite things . . . the vast and vague extravagance that lies at the bottom of the Celtic heart." And to phrases like that, which adumbrate the spirit of the work, you must add a style which is allusive, mystic, and symbolical : in fact, a mode of expression rather like Mr Yeats' own early poetry. But the crux of the matter lies there. For the production of really good work of this kind demands just the equipment which Mr Yeats happens to possess : the right temperament and the right degree (a high one) of poetic craftsmanship. It is a

Contemporary Poets

rare combination—unique, of course, in so far as the element of individuality enters. And attempts which have been made to gain the same effects with a different natural endowment have failed in proportion as temperament was unsuited or ‘the capacity for taking pains’ was less. Hence ‘Celtic’ poetry, in the specific sense, has fallen into some disfavour. Yet when mood and material and craft ‘have met and kissed each other,’ it is clear that authentic beauty is created; and that of a kind which cannot be made in any other way. Thus we might choose, from the romantic work of Miss Eva Gore Booth, passages where all the desirable qualities seem to meet. There is, for instance, the poem which prefaces her *Triumph of Maeve*, from which I take the last two stanzas. Here is finely caught that unrest of soul which we have been taught to believe essentially Celtic; though it probably haunts every imaginative mind, of whatever race.

There is no rest for the soul that has seen the wild eyes
of Maeve;

No rest for the heart once caught in the net of her
yellow hair—

No quiet for the fallen wind, no peace for the broken wave;
Rising and falling, falling and rising with soft sounds
everywhere,

There is no rest for the soul that has seen the wild eyes
of Maeve.

An Irish Group

I have seen Maeve of the Battles wandering over the
hill
And I know that the deed that is in my heart is her
deed ;
And my soul is blown about by the wild winds of her
will,
For always the living must follow whither the dead
would lead—
I have seen Maeve of the Battles wandering over the
hill.

From the same romance we may select a speech
by Fionavar, Queen Maeve's beautiful young
daughter. The sense of the supernatural enters
here, for the occasion is Samhain, the pagan All
Souls' Eve. It is a night when gods and fairies are
abroad, and Fionavar has seen things strange and
awesome :

As I came down the valley after dark,
The little golden dagger at my breast
Flashed into fire lit by a sudden spark ;
I saw the lights flame on the haunted hill,
My soul was blown about by a strange wind.
Though the green fir trees rose up stark and still
Against the sky, yet in my haunted mind
They bent and swayed before a magic storm :
A wave of darkness thundered through the sky,
And drowned the world. . . .

In *Nera's Song*, again, as in the whole romance,

Contemporary Poets

we find the element of dreams which is supposed to be an indubitable sign of the Celtic temperament. Nera, who is the Queen's bard, has just returned after an absence of one whole year in the Land of Faëry ; and though it is autumn, his arms are full of primroses, the fairies' magical flower :

I bring you all my dreams, O golden Maeve,
There are no dreams in all the world like these
The dreams of Spring, the golden fronds that wave
In faery land beneath dark forest-trees,—
I bring you all my dreams.

I bring you all my dreams, Fionavar,
From that dim land where every dream is sweet,
I have brought you a little shining star,
I strew my primroses beneath your feet,
I bring you all my dreams.

There is yet another style in which the heroic tales are occasionally treated, and it is directly contrasted with either of those which we have just considered. Examples of it may be found in Miss Alice Milligan's book of *Hero Lays*, where it will be seen that the poet's chief concern is with the story itself, rather than with the manner of telling. In such a piece as "Brian of Banba," for instance, the action is clear and moves rapidly. There is a sense of morning air and light in the poem which is very

An Irish Group

refreshing after the atmosphere of golden afternoon, or evening twilight, in which we have been wandering. It comes partly from the blithe swing of the rhythm: partly from the vigour and clear strength of diction. And a true dramatic sense imparts the life and movement of quickly changing emotion.

Banba is one of the many beautiful old names for Ireland; and Brian was perhaps her greatest king. He lived about the time of our English Alfred and, like him, Brian fought continually against the invading Dane. He, too, when a young man, lived for a long time the life of an outlaw—outcast even from his own clan because he would not suffer the Danish yoke. The poem relates an incident of Brian's appearance at the palace of his brother, King Mahon, after a long absence. He strides into the gay assembly alone, his body worn thin by privation and his garments ragged.

“Brian, my brother,” said the King, in a tone of scornful wonder,

“Why dost thou come in beggar-guise our palace portals under?

Where hast thou wandered since yester year, on what venture of love hast thou tarried?

Tell us the count of thy prey of deer, and what cattleherds thou hast harried.

.

Contemporary Poets

"I have hunted no deer since yester year, I have
harried no neighbour's cattle,
I have wooed no love, I have joined no game, save
the kingly game of battle ;
The Danes were my prey by night and day, in their
forts of hill and hollow,
And I come from the desert-lands alone, since none
are alive to follow.
Some were slain on the plundered plain, and some in
the midnight marching ;
Some were lost in the winter floods, and some by the
fever parching ;
Some have perished by wounds of spears, and some
by the shafts of bowmen ;
And some by hunger and some by thirst, and all are
dead ; but they slaughtered first
Their tenfold more of their foemen."

The King impulsively offers him gifts for a reward,
but Brian declines them :

"I want no cattle from out your herds, no share of
your shining treasure ;
But grant me now"—and he turned to look on the
listening warriors' faces—
"A hundred more of the clan Dal Cas, to follow me
over plain and pass :
To die, as fitteth the brave Dal Cas, at war with
the Outland races."

It must not be supposed, however, that these
poets are working solely upon romantic themes,
158

An Irish Group

more or less in the epic manner. On the contrary, direct treatment of the saga is declining, even with the poets who, like those we have named, were formerly preoccupied with it. Mr Cousins' volume of 1915 is sharply symptomatic of the change. Subjects of more social and more immediate interest are engaging attention, and legendary material is passing into a phase of allusion and symbol. Concurrently, there is a development of the pure lyric which gives great promise, being sound and sweet and vigorous. It has all the signs of vitality, drawing its inspiration directly from life, keeping close to the earth, as it were, and often dealing with the large and simple things of existence.

One may not make too precise a claim here for affiliation with the literary revival ; but observing the movement broadly, it would appear that this is its more popular manifestation, springing out of the devotion to the old language of the country, its folklore and the life of its people. That current of the stream would touch actual existence much more closely than æsthetic or academic study ; and while one might regard Lady Gregory and Mr Yeats as the pioneers of the movement on the specifically literary side, on the other hand there are Dr Hyde, A. E., and others,

Contemporary Poets

whose influence must have counted largely in these new lyrics of life.

There are about half a dozen poets who are making these sweet, fresh songs. They have not published very much, but that follows from the nature of the medium in which they are working. Lyrical rapture is brief, and the form of its expression correspondingly small. Very seldom can it be sustained so long and so keenly as, for example, in Mr Stephens' "Prelude and a Song," for the wise poet accepts the natural limits of inspiration and technique. But this little group does not, of course, include all the Irish lyrists. The poets whom we may describe as literary—who have, at any rate, the more obvious connexion with the revival—have made beautiful lyrics too. But they are sharply contrasted in subject or style, or both, with those others. Thus we may take a "Spring Rondel" by Mr Cousins, which is supposed to be sung by a starling :

I clink my castanet,
And beat my little drum ;
For spring at last has come,
And on my parapet
Of chestnut, gummy-wet,
Where bees begin to hum,
I clink my castanet,
And beat my little drum.

An Irish Group

"Spring goes," you say, "suns set."

So be it ! Why be glum ?

Enough, the spring has come ;

And without fear or fret

I clink my castanet,

And beat my little drum.

The lyrical virtues of that need no emphasis : the quick, true reflection of a mood : the lightness of touch and grace of expression. It is, however, mainly by qualities of form that one is delighted here—the art's the thing. To make a rondel at all seems an achievement ; and to make it so daintily, with playful fancy and feeling caught to the nicest shade, almost compels wonder. But that is characteristic of the kind of verse of which I am speaking, another aspect of which may be seen in a captivating fragment which has been translated by this poet from the Irish of some period before the tenth century. It is called "The Student"; and to find the like of it, with its combined love of nature and of learning, one must seek a certain 'Clerk of Oxenford' and endow him with the spirit of his own springtime poet—

High on my hedge of bush and tree

A blackbird sings his song to me,

And far above my lined book

I hear the voice of wren and rook.

*also translated
by J. G. Hyde*

Contemporary Poets

From the bush-top, in garb of grey,
The cuckoo calls the hours of day.
Right well do I—God send me good !—
Set down my thoughts within the wood.

It is not often that these poets are occupied with “Modern Movements,” wherein they differ from their English contemporaries. For that reason, it is the more significant that one public question has moved them deeply. Thus we find Miss Mitchell writing of womanhood :

Oh, what to us your little slights and scorns,
You who dethrone us with a careless breath.
God made us awful queens of birth and death,
And set upon our brows His crown of thorns.

And Miss Gore-Booth, thinking of the sheltered ignorance of many women who oppose the suffrage for their sex, makes a little parable :

The princess in her world-old tower pined
A prisoner, brazen-caged, without a gleam
Of sunlight, or a windowful of wind ;
She lived but in a long lamp-lighted dream.

They brought her forth at last when she was old ;
The sunlight on her blanchèd hair was shed
Too late to turn its silver into gold.
“ Ah, shield me from this brazen glare ! ” she said.

An Irish Group

Mr Cousins, too, has several noble sonnets on the theme, from which we may select part of the one called "To the Suffragettes" :

Who sets her shoulder to the Cross of Christ,
Lo ! she shall wear sharp scorn upon her brow ;
And she whose hand is put to Freedom's plough
May not with sleek Expediency make tryst :

.

O fateful heralds, charged with Time's decree,
Whose feet with doom have compassed Error's wall ;
Whose lips have blown the trump of Destiny
Till ancient thrones are shaking toward their fall ;
Shout ! for the Lord hath given to you the free
New age that comes with great new hope to all.

The main point of contrast, in turning to the more 'popular' lyrics, is their simplicity. It is a difference of manner as well as of material. You will not find in this verse either an elaborate metrical form, or the treatment of questions such as that which we have just noted. Those things belong to a more complex condition, both of life and of letters, than that which is reflected here. And if such a contrast always implied separation in time, we could believe ourselves to be in a different epoch—a younger and more ingenuous age. But that, of course, by no means follows. Even if we regard it as figured by a kind of separation in space,

Contemporary Poets

with town and university on the one hand and the broad land and toiling people on the other, it is still too arbitrary and, moreover, it is incomplete. No room is found for the wanderers in neutral territory.

The contrast is rather like that between the newer English poetry and the old. It is indicative of a current of thought which is running throughout Europe, and which may be observed in England, stimulating the more vital work of contemporary poets. That, crudely stated, is a perception of the value of life—of the whole of life, sense and spirit, heart and brain and soul. As the poet is seized by it, he is carried into a larger and more vivid world, one of manifold significance and beauty which he had never before perceived. He grasps eagerly at *all* the stuff of existence, persistently seeks his inspiration in life instead of in literature, and having rejected the artifice of conventional terminology, begins to create a new kind of poetry.

Now that undercurrent is not visible in a superficial glance at this poetry. Even native critics seem to have missed it, or tend to refer it to anything rather than to the whole movement of the national mind towards reality. But that is not surprising, indeed. For the limpidity of these lyrics is quite untroubled; they are innocent of

An Irish Group

ulterior purpose, and free from the least chill of philosophical questioning into origins or ends. The impulse out of which they came is instinctive : their very art, at least in the selection of themes, is spontaneous. An excellent example is the whole volume by Mr Joseph Campbell called *The Mountainy Singer*. He has another, *Irishry*, but although that is very interesting in its studies of Irish life, it is not so good as poetry, nor is it so apt to our present purpose, because a tinge of self-consciousness has crept into it. Let us take, however, the piece which gives its name to the first of these two books :

I am the mountainy singer—
The voice of the peasant's dream,
The cry of the wind on the wooded hill,
The leap of the fish in the stream.

Quiet and love I sing—
The carn on the mountain crest,
The cailin in her lover's arms,
The child at its mother's breast.

.

Sorrow and death I sing—
The canker come on the corn,
The fisher lost in the mountain loch,
The cry at the mouth of morn.

Contemporary Poets

No other life I sing,
For I am sprung of the stock
That broke the hilly land for bread,
And built the nest in the rock !

That comes directly out of life, and the confidence and sincerity of it are a result. The poet, become aware of the prompting of genius, loyally follows its leading through the common and familiar things of human experience. And partly because of his loyalty to himself ; partly because he happens to be in touch with the land—quite literally the oldest and commonest thing of all, except the sea—there comes into his poetry a sense of natural dignity and strength. His themes are simple and touched with universal significance. Thus there is the song of ploughing :

I will go with my father a-ploughing
To the green field by the sea,
And the rooks and the crows and the seagulls
Will come flocking after me.
I will sing to the patient horses
With the lark in the white of the air,
And my father will sing the plough-song
That blesses the cleaving share.

One finds, too, a song of reaping, and one of winter, and one of night.

There is a love-song, pretty and tender, and

An Irish Group

fresh with the suggestion of breezes and blue skies,
which begins like this :

My little dark love is a wineberry,
As swarth and as sweet, I hold ;
But as the dew on the wineberry
Her heart is a-cold.

There is a piece, in *Irishry*, which tells of the
wonder of childhood, and another in the same book
which reverently touches the thought of mother-
hood and old age :

As a white candle
In a holy place,
So is the beauty
Of an agèd face.

As the spent radiance
Of the winter sun,
So is a woman
When her travail done.

Her brood gone from her,
And her thoughts as still
As the waters
Under a ruined mill.

So we might turn from one to another of these
old and ever-new themes : not alone in this poet's
work, but also in that of Mr Padraic Colum, whom
he resembles. We shall notice in their music a

Contemporary Poets

characteristic harmony. It is a blending of three diverse elements : the individual, the national, and the universal. One would expect a discord sometimes ; but the measure of the success of this verse is that it contrives to be, at one and the same time, specifically lyrical (and therefore a reflection of personality), definitely Irish, and completely human. Most of the poems will illustrate this, but for an obvious example take this one by Mr Campbell :

I met a walking-man ;
His head was old and grey.
I gave him what I had
To crutch him on his way.
The man was Mary's Son, I'll swear ;
A glory trembled in his hair !

And since that blessed day
I've never known the pinch :
I plough a broad townland,
And dig a river-inch ;
And on my hearth the fire is bright
For all that walk by day or night.

If one found that on a bit of torn paper in the wilds of Africa, one would know it for unquestionable Irish. There are half a dozen signs, but the spirit of the last two lines is enough. The element of personality is there, too ; clearly visible in tone and choice of words to those who know the poet's

An Irish Group

work a little. But stronger than all is the human note, with all that it implies of man's need of religion, his incorrigible habit of making God in his own image, and the half comical, half pathetic materialism of his faith.

There are, of course, some occasions when the blending is unequal: when one or other of the three elements, usually that of national feeling, weighs down the balance. But, on the other hand, there are many pieces in which it is very intimate and subtle. Then it follows that the poet is at his best, for he has forgotten the immediacy of self and country and the world of men and things in the joy of singing. Of such is this "Cradle Song" by Mr Colum :

O, men from the fields !
Come softly within.
Tread softly, softly,
O ! men coming in.

Mavourneen is going
From me and from you,
To Mary, the Mother,
Whose mantle is blue !

From reek of the smoke
And cold of the floor,
And the peering of things
Across the half-door.

Contemporary Poets

O, men from the fields !
Soft, softly come thro'.
Mary puts round him
Her mantle of blue.

Such also is Mr Colum's "Ballad Maker," from which I quote the first and last stanzas :

Once I loved a maiden fair,
 Over the hills and far away.
Lands she had and lovers to spare,
 Over the hills and far away.
And I was stooped and troubled sore,
And my face was pale, and the coat I wore
Was thin as my supper the night before.
 Over the hills and far away.

.

To-morrow, Mavourneen a sleeveen weds,
 Over the hills and far away ;
With corn in haggard and cattle in shed,
 Over the hills and far away.
And I who have lost her—the dear, the rare,
Well, I got me this ballad to sing at the fair,
'Twill bring enough money to drown my care,
 Over the hills and far away.

It is an arresting fact, however, that the spirit of nationality is strong in the work of these poets. True, one may distinguish between a national sense, keen and directly expressed, and the almost

170

An Irish Group

subconscious influence of race. The first is a theme deliberately chosen by the poet and variously treated by him. It is a conscious and direct expression—of aspiration or regret. Racial influence is something deeper and more constant : something, too, which quite confounds the sceptic on this particular subject. Whether from inheritance or environment, it has ‘bred true’ in these poets ; and it will be found to pervade their work like an atmosphere. It belongs inalienably to themselves : it is of the essence of their genius, and it is revealed everywhere, in little things as in great, in cadency and idiom as well as in an attitude to life and a certain range of ideas.

But though we may make the distinction, it will hardly do to disengage the strands, because they are so closely bound together. We may only note the predominance of one or the other, with an occasional complete and perfect combination. Perhaps the work in which they are least obvious is the slim volume of Miss Ella Young. But, even here, and choosing two poems where the artistic instinct has completely subdued its material, we shall find some of the signs that we are looking for ; and not altogether *because* we are looking for them. Thus a sonnet, called “The Virgin Mother,” suggests its origin in its very title and, moreover,

Contemporary Poets

it is occupied with a thought of death and a sense of blissful quietude which are familiar in Irish poetry.

Now Day's worn out, and Dusk has claimed a share
Of earth and sky and all the things that be,
I lay my tired head against your knee,
And feel your fingers smooth my tangled hair.
I loved you once, when I had heart to dare,
And sought you over many a land and sea ;
Yet all the while you waited here for me
In a sweet stillness shut away from care.
I have no longing now, no dreams of bliss.
But drowsed in peace through the soft gloom I wait
Until the stars be kindled by God's breath ;
For then you'll bend above me with the kiss
Earth's children long for when the hour grows late,
Mother of Consolation, Sovereign Death.

In the blank-verse piece called "Twilight" it is again the title which conveys the direct sign of affinity, but it will also be found to lurk in every line :

The sky is silver-pale with just one star,
One lonely wanderer from the shining host
Of Night's companions. Through the drowsy woods
The shadows creep and touch with quietness
The curling fern-heads and the ancient trees.
The sea is all a-glimmer with faint lights
That change and move as if the unseen prow
Of Niamh's galley cleft its waveless floor,

An Irish Group

And Niamh stood there with the magic token,
The apple-branch with silver singing leaves.
The wind has stolen away as though it feared
To stir the fringes of her faery mantle
Dream-woven in the Land of Heart's Desire,
And all the world is hushed as though she called
Ossian again, and no one answered her.

Now that, in inspiration and imagery, is very clearly derived from native legendary sources. But no one would expect to find in such work a direct expression of national feeling. The backward-looking poet, the one who is drawn instinctively to old themes and times, has not usually the temper for politics, even on the higher plane. Or if he have, he will make a rigid separation in style and treatment between his poetry in the two kinds. Thus Miss Milligan sharply differentiates her lays on heroic subjects from her lyrics. The lays try to catch the spirit of the age out of which the stories came. The lyrics, as lyrics should, reflect no other spirit than the poet's own. The lays are somewhat strict in form : they are in a brisk narrative style, with a swinging rhythm and plenty of vigour. The songs, depending on varying sense impressions and fluctuating emotion, are more irregular as to form and, at the same time, stronger in their appeal to human sympathy. It is in them

Contemporary Poets

that the poet is able to express the passionate love of country which, superimposed on a deep sense of Ireland's melancholy history and an intense longing for freedom, is the birthright of so many Irish poets. One would like to quote entire the lovely "Song of Freedom," in which the poet hears in wind and wave and brook a joyous prophecy. But here is the last stanza :

To Ara of Connacht's isles,
As I went sailing o'er the sea,
The wind's word, the brook's word,
The wave's word, was plain to me—
*"As we are, though she is not
As we are, shall Banba be—
There is no King can rule the wind
There is no fetter for the sea."*

More beautiful and significant, perhaps, is a fragment from "There Were Trees in Tir-Conal":

Fallen in Erin are all those leafy forests ;
The oaks lie buried under bogland mould ;
Only in legends dim are they remembered,
Only in ancient books their fame is told.
But seers, who dream of times to come, have promised
Forests shall rise again where perished these ;
And of this desolate land it shall be spoken,
"In Tir-Conal of the territories there are trees."

The prophetic figure there, of course, is symbolical ; but thinking of the basis it has in fact—of the schemes

An Irish Group

which are afoot in the Isle for afforestation—one cannot help wondering whether it was consciously suggested by them. Not that there need be the slightest relation, of course. The poetical soul will often take a leap in the dark and reach a shining summit long before the careful people who travel by daylight along beaten tracks are half way up the hill. Still, there is proof that this group of writers is keenly interested in the question of the land and the organized effort to reclaim it. It is the more practical form of their patriotism, and the sign by which one knows it for something more than a sentiment. It is a deeply rooted and reasoned sense that the well-being of a nation, and therefore its strength and greatness, come ultimately from the soil and depend upon the close and faithful relation of the people to it. That surely is the conviction which underlies the work of a poet like Mr Padraic Colum, and particularly such a piece as his “Plougher”:

Sunset and silence ! A man : around him earth savage,
earth broken ;
Beside him two horses—a plough !

Earth savage, earth broken, the brutes, the dawn-man
there in the sunset,
And the Plough that is twin to the Sword, that is
founder of cities !

.

Contemporary Poets

Slowly the darkness falls, the broken lands blend with
the savage ;

The brute-tamer stands by the brutes, a head's breadth
only above them.

A head's breadth? Ay, but therein is hell's depth, and
the height up to heaven,

And the thrones of the gods and their halls, their
chariots, purples and splendours.

In closing this study we must take a glance at two recent volumes, one containing the poetry of Mr Seumas O'Sullivan and the other Mr Cousins' latest work. Mr O'Sullivan's book is curiously interesting, inasmuch as it unites certain contrasted qualities which are found separately in the other poets we have been considering. Thus, this poet is 'literary' in the sense of knowing and loving good books, in his familiarity with the old literature of his country, and in the fact that those things have had a palpable influence upon him. Temperamentally he is an artist, with the artistic instinct to subordinate everything to the beauty of his work. But he is also like the more 'popular' poets in his lyrical gift and in the range and depth of his sympathies ; so that his collected poems of 1912 may be regarded in some degree as an epitome of modern Irish poetry. There you will find work which indicates that its author might have lived very happily in a visionary world of æsthetic delight.

An Irish Group

He might have chosen always to sing about gods and heroes and fair ladies with "white hands, foam-frail." But, just as clearly, you will see that he has been aroused from dreams. Vanishing remnants of them are perceptible in such a piece as "The Twilight People"; and when they are gone, in that serene moment before complete awakening, when the light is growing and the birds call and a fresh air blows, you get a piece like "Praise":

Dear, they are praising your beauty,
The grass and the sky:
The sky in a silence of wonder,
The grass in a sigh.

I too would sing for your praising,
Dearest, had I
Speech as the whispering grass,
Or the silent sky.

These have an art for the praising
Beauty so high.
Sweet, you are praised in a silence,
Sung in a sigh.

Then comes the awakening, sudden and sharp,
with an impulse to spring out and away from those
old dreams of myth and romance:

Bundle the gods away:
Richer than Danaan gold,
The whisper of leaves in the rain,
The secrets the wet hills hold.

Contemporary Poets

A spiritual adventure seems to be implied in the poem from which this fragment is taken, similar to that which Mr Cousins has recorded in "Straight and Crooked." It is the call of reality: the impulse which is drawing the poetic spirit closer and closer to life, and bidding it seek inspiration in common human experience. Thus when we find Mr O'Sullivan invoking the vision of earth we soon discover that 'earth' means something more to him than 'countryside'—the beauty of Nature and of pastoral existence. It comprises also towns and crowded streets and busy people; and it seems to mean ultimately any aspect of human existence which has the power to induce poetic ecstasy. An infinitely wider range is thus open to the poet, and though this little volume does not pretend to cover any large part of it, there are pieces which suggest its almost boundless possibility. Let us put two of them together. The first, "A Piper," describes a little street scene :

A Piper in the streets to-day
Set up, and tuned, and started to play,
And away, away, away on the tide
Of his music we started; on every side
Doors and windows were opened wide,
And men left down their work and came,
And women with petticoats coloured like flame

An Irish Group

And little bare feet that were blue with cold,
Went dancing back to the age of gold,
And all the world went gay, went gay,
For half an hour in the street to-day.

That expresses the rapture which is evoked directly by the touch of the actual. The next piece, a fragment from "A Madonna," is equally characteristic; but its inspiration came through another art, a picture by Beatrice Elvery:

Draw nigh, O foolish worshippers who mock
With pious woe of sainted imagery
The kingly-human presence of your God.
Draw near, and with new reverence gaze on her.
See you, these hands have toiled, these feet have trod
In all a woman's business; bend the knee.
For this of very certainty is she
Ordained of heavenly hierarchies to rock
The cradle of the infant carpenter.

Under the diverse sources from which such poems immediately spring, there flows the current which is fertilizing, in greater or less degree, all modern poetry. It has been running strongly in England for some years, but hitherto the Irish poet has hardly seemed conscious of it, though it was visibly moving him. Its presence has been mainly felt in the silence of Mr Yeats, whose lovely romanticism fell dumb at its touch. But, significantly, the

Contemporary Poets

latest poetic utterance of Ireland is a cry of complete realization. It has remained for Mr Cousins, more sensitive and complex than his compatriots, to hear the call of his age more consciously than they ; and it is left to him, in grace and courage, to declare it :

. . . From a sleep I emerge. I am clothed again
with this woven vesture of laws ;
But I am not, and never again shall be the man that
I was.

At the zenith of life I am born again, I begin.
Know ye, I am awake, outside and within.
I have heard, I have seen, I have known ; I feel the
bite of this shackle of place and name,
And nothing can be the same.

.

I have sent three shouts of freedom along the wind.
I have struck one hand of kinship in the hands of
Gods, and one in the hands of women and men.
I am awake. I shall never sleep again.

Rose Macaulay

THESE is one small volume of poems by Miss Macaulay, called *The Two Blind Countries*. It is curiously interesting, since it may be regarded as the testament of mysticism for the year of its appearance, nineteen hundred and fourteen. That is, indeed, the most important fact about it ; though no one need begin to fear that he is to be fobbed off with inferior poetry on that account. For the truth is that the artistic value of this work is almost, if not quite, equal to the exceptional power of abstraction that it evinces. Poetry has really been achieved here, extremely individual in manner and in matter, and of a high order of beauty.

One is compelled, however, though one may a little regret the ^{blind}compulsion, to start from the fact of the poet's ^vnot ^wet ^eheretical tendency. Not that she would mind, presumably ; the title of her book is an avowal, clear enough at a second glance, of its point of view. But the reader has an instinct, in which the mere interpreter but follows him, to accept a poem first as art rather than thought ; and if he examine it at all, to begin with what may be called its concrete beauty. I will not say that the order is reversed in the case of Miss

Contemporary Poets

Macaulay's poetry, since that would be to accuse her of an artistic crime of which she is emphatically not guilty. But it is significant that the greater number of pieces in this book impress the mind with the idea they convey, simultaneously with the sounds in which it is expressed. And as the idea is generally adventurous, and sometimes fantastic, it is that which arrests the reader and on which he lingers, at any rate long enough to discover its originality.

But though the mystical element of the work is suggested in its very title, one discovers almost as early that it is mysticism of a new kind. It belongs inalienably to this poet and is unmistakably of this age. The world of matter, this jolly place of light and air and colour and human faces, is vividly apprehended; but it is seen by the poet to be ringed round by another realm which, though unsubstantial, is no less real. In *gain*, strong is her consciousness of that other realm and its presence so insistently felt, that sometimes she is not sure to which of the two she really belongs. In the first poem of the book, using the fictive 'he' as its subject, she indicates her attitude to that region beyond sense. In the physical world, this 'blind land' of 'shadows and droll shapes,' the soul is an alien wanderer. Constantly it hears a 'clamorous

Rose Macaulay

whisper ' from the other side of the door of sense,
coming from the

. . . muffled speech
Of a world of folk.

But no cry can reach those others : no clear sight
can be had of them, and no intelligible word of
theirs can come back.

Only through a crack in the door's blind face
He would reach a thieving hand,
To draw some clue to his own strange place
From the other land.

But his closed hand came back empty,
As a dream drops from him who wakes ;
And naught might he know but how a muffled sea
In whispers breaks.

.
On either side of a gray barrier
The two blind countries lie ;
But he knew not which held him prisoner,
Nor yet know I.

This poem may be said to state the theme of
the whole book. It would appear, however, that
in the difficult feat of giving form to thought so
intangible, the poet has attained here a detachment
which is almost cold. But it would be unfair to
judge her manner of expression from one poem ;
and it happens that there is another piece, built

Contemporary Poets

upon a similar theme, which is much more characteristic. It is called "Foregrounds," and here again the two countries are conceived as bordering upon each other, inter-penetrating, but sharply contrasted as night from day. The contrast favours a more vivid setting, and the subjective treatment, admitting deeper emotion, infuses a warmth that "The Alien" lacked. Moreover, the psychic region is here called simply the *dream-country*; and, presented in the delicate suggestion of a moonlit night, it hints only at the lure of the mystery, and nothing of its terror. Throughout the poem, too, runs exuberant joy in common earthly things, in the beauty of nature and in human feeling; and this is followed, in the closing lines of each stanza, by an afterthought and a touch of melancholy: reflection coming, in the most natural way, close upon the heels of emotion. Thus the first lines revel in the glory of spring; and then, almost audibly, the tone drops to the lower level of one who perceives that glory as the veil of something beyond it.

The pleasant ditch is a milky way,
So alight with stars it is,
And over it breaks, like pale sea-spray,
The laughing cataract of the may
In luminous harmonies.

Rose Macaulay

(Cloak with a flower-wrought veil
The face of the dream-country.
The fields of the moon are kind, are pale,
And quiet is she.)

Thus, too, in the third stanza, the recurrent idea of an alien spirit is caught into imagery which glows with light and colour : imagery so simple and sensuous as almost to mock abstraction and quite to disguise it ; but bearing at its heart the essence of a philosophy. Again the soul is imagined as standing at the barrier of the two countries, when reality has melted to an apparition and the sense of that other realm has grown acute. Bereft of the comfortable earth, but powerless still to enter the dream-country : standing lonely and fearful at the cold verge of the mystic region, the spirit will seek to draw about it the garment of appearance :

I will weave, of the clear clean shapes of things,
A curtain to shelter me ;
I will paint it with kingcups and sunrisings,
And glints of blue for the swallow's wings,
And green for the apple-tree.
(Oh, a whisper has pierced the veil
Out of the dream-country,
As a wind moans in the straining sail
Of a ship lost at sea.)

In reading this poem, and in others too, one is

Contemporary Poets

struck by the hold which the real world has upon our poet. It is a surprising fact in one of so speculative a turn, and is the clearest sign by which we recognize her work as of our time and no other. Her thought may be projected very far, but her feet are generally upon solid ground. Perhaps I ought rather to say that they are always there; for it is more than probable that bed-rock may exist in two or three poems where I have been unable to get down to it. It is in any case safe to say that a sense of reality—shown in human sympathy and tenderness for lowly creatures, in love of nature and perception of beauty, in truth to fact, in a touch of shrewd insight and a sense of humour bred of the habit of detachment—is very strong. I do not suggest that these qualities are everywhere apparent. By their nature they are such as could not often enter into the framework of poems so subtly wrought. But they are woven into the texture of the poet's mentality, and have even directed its method. So that, remote as may be the idea upon which she is working, it is generally brought within the range of sight; and, intangible though it may seem, it is given definite and charming shape. And if there were not one obvious proof of this steady anchorage, we might have happy assurance of it in the clarity and precision of her

186

Rose Macaulay

thought. But fortunately there *is* obvious proof. There is, for instance, this delicious passage in the poem from which I have just quoted, surely proving a kinship with our own 'blind country' as close as with that other and something dearer :

The jolly donkeys that love me well
Nuzzle with thistly lips ;
The harchbell is song made visible,
The dandelion's lamp a miracle,
When the day's lamp dips and dips.

There are, too, a sonnet called " Cards " and the very beautiful longer poem, " Summons," in which the glow of human love makes of the supernatural a mere shadow. In " Cards " the scene is a ' dim lily-illuminated garden,' and four people are playing there by candle light. But out of the darkness which rings the circle of flickering light sinister things creep, menacing the frail life of one of the players.

But, like swords clashing, my love on their hate
Struck sharp, and drove, and pushed. . . . Grimly
 round you
Fought we that fight, they pressing passionate
Into the lit circle which called and drew
Shadows and moths of night. . . . I held the gate.
You said, " Our game," more truly than you knew.

Again we perceive this sense of reality in the

Contemporary Poets

humour of a poem like "St Mark's Day" or "Three." It is a quality hearty and cheery in the way of one who knows all the facts, but has reckoned with them and can afford to laugh. It has a depth of tone unexpected in an artist whose natural impulse seems to be towards delicate line and neutral tint ; and there is a tang of salt in it which one suspects of having been added of intent—as a quite superfluous preservative against sentimentality. "St Mark's Day" is very illuminating in this respect, and in the bracing sanity under which mere superstition wilts. The village girl, teased by neighbours into believing that her spectre was seen the night before and that therefore she must die within the year, is a genuine bit of rustic humanity. No portrait of her is given ; but in two or three strong touches she stands before us, plump, rosy and rather stupid ; hale enough to live her fourscore years, but sobbing in foolish fright as her sturdy arms peg the wet linen upon the line.

I laughed at her over the sticky larch fence,
And said, "Who's down-hearted, Dolly ?"

And Dolly sobbed at me, "They saw you, too !"
(And so the liars said they had,
Though I've not wasted paper nor rhymes telling you),
And, "Well," said I, "*I'm* not sad."

Rose Macaulay

" But since you and me must die within the year,
What if we went together
To make cowslip balls in the fields, and hear
The blackbirds whistling to the weather ? "

So in the water-fields till blue mists rose
We loitered, Dolly and I,
And pulled wet kingcups where the cold brook goes,
And when we've done living, we'll die.

The realism of that goes deeper than its technique, and is a notable weapon in the hands of such an idealist. But in "Three," another humorous poem, something even more surprising has been accomplished. "St Mark's Day" is a bit of pure comedy, and might have been written by a poet for whom *one* 'blind country' was the beginning and end of all experience. That is to say, it is interesting as proof of a healthy grasp on the real world ; but the distinctive feature of this poetry hardly appears in it. Abstraction is absent, inevitably, of course ; and with it that ideal realm which largely pre-occupies the poet's thought. But in "Three," with reality no less strong, with art matching it in bold and vigorous strokes, and touches here and there positively comic ; with the scene laid out-of-doors in a sunny noonday of August, there is achieved an almost startling sense of the supernatural. More than that, it is the supernatural under two different aspects, or on two

Contemporary Poets

separate planes (whichever may be the correct way to state that sort of thing) : the consciousness of a ghostly presence, in the accepted sense of the spirit of one dead ; and that obscure but disturbing awareness of a hidden life close at hand which most people have experienced at some time or other. But while the poet has sketched these two of her "Three" with an equally light hand, smiling amusedly, as it were, at her own fantasy, she has differentiated them quite clearly. For the true ghost, conjured out of the stuff of memory, association and the influence of locality, is a creature of pure imagination. He is not so much described as suggested, and only dimly felt. There is a stanza devoted to the Cambridge landscape in the hot noon, and then—

In the long grass and tall nettles

I lay abed,

With hawthorn and bryony

Tangled o'erhead.

And I was alone with Hobson,

Two centuries dead.

Hidden by sprawling brambles

The Nine Waters were ;

From a chalky bed they bubbled up,

Clean, green, and fair.

And I was alone with Hobson,

Whose ghost walks there.

Rose Macaulay

But it seems that the poet is not alone with the pleasant ghost of the old university carrier. There is a third presence near, hidden and silent, but malign; and the stanzas in which this secret presence grows to a realization that is acute and almost terrifying, are remarkably done. They illustrate this poet's ability to create illusion out of mere scraps of material, and those of the most commonplace kind; and they rely for their verbal effect upon the homeliest words. Yet the impression of an intangible something that is evil and uncanny is so strong, that when the very real head of the tramp appears the contrast provokes a sudden laugh at its absurdity.

And something yawned, and from the grass
A head upreared;
And I was not alone with Hobson,
For at me leered
A great, gaunt, greasy tramp
With a golden beard.

He had a beard like a dandelion,
And I had none;
He had tea in a beer-bottle,
Warm with the sun;
He had pie in a paper bag,
Not yet begun.

The vigorous handling of that passage, and its

Contemporary Poets

comical actuality, makes an excellent foil to the subtler method of presenting the two spirits, living and dead. And the poem as a whole may be said to reflect the dual elements which are everywhere present in this work. It is true that in a more characteristic piece the ideal will prevail over the real. And consequently, imagination will there be found to weave finer strands, while thought goes much further afield. Thus, in "Crying for the Moon" and in "The Thief," one may follow the idea very far; and in both poems we move in the pale light and dim shadow where mystery is evoked at a hint. Never, I think, was there such an eerie dawn as that in "The Thief"; yet never was orchard-joy more keenly realized—

He stood at the world's secret heart
In the haze-wrapt mystery;
And fat pears, mellow on the lip,
He supped like a honey-bee;
But the apples he crunched with sharp white teeth
Were pungent, like the sea.

Probably it is in work like this, where both blind countries find expression, that Miss Macaulay is most successful. But when she gives imagination licence to wander alone in the ideal region, it occasionally seems to go out of sight and sound of the good earth. That happens in "Completion," a

Rose Macaulay

poem which is frankly mystical in theme, symbolism, and terminology. There is not a touch of reality in it ; and neither its fine strange music, nor glowing colour, nor certain perfect phrases, nor the language, at once rich and tender and strong, can make it more than the opalescent wraith of a poem. But perhaps that is just what the author intended it to be !

In any case "Completion" does correspond to, and daintily express, the mystical strain which is dominant in this work. It is, however, the extreme example of it. It stands at the opposite pole from "St Mark's Day," and antithetical to that, it might have been written by a mystic for whom the material world was virtually nothing. Moreover, it might belong to almost any time, or not to time at all ; whereas the mysticism of the book as a whole is peculiarly that of its own author and its own day. It is individual—a thing of this poet's personality and no other—in the evidence of a finely sensitive spirit, of a gift of vision abnormally acute, imaginative power that ranges far and free, and a fine capacity for abstract thought. But all these qualities, though pervasive and dominant, are sweetly controlled by a humane temper that has been nurtured on realities.

Hence comes a duality in which it is, perhaps,

Contemporary Poets

not too fanciful to see a feature of contemporary thought—intensely interested in the region of ideas, but frankly claiming the material world as the basis and starting-point of all its speculation. One might put it colloquially (though without the implied reproach) as making the best of both worlds : humanity recognizing an honourable kinship with matter, but reaching out continually after the larger existence which it confidently believes to be latent in the physical world itself.

A voice may be raised to protest that that is too vaguely generalized ; and if so, the protestant may turn for more precise evidence to such poems as “Trinity Sunday” and “The Devourers.” There he will perceive, after a moment’s reflection, the store of modern knowledge—of actual data—which has been assimilated to the mystical element here. Let him consider, for example, the first two stanzas of “The Devourers,” and other similar passages :

Cambridge town is a beleaguered city ;
For south and north, like a sea,
There beat on its gates, without haste or pity,
The downs and the fen country.

Cambridge towers, so old, so wise,
They were builded but yesterday,
Watched by sleepy gray secret eyes
That smiled as at children’s play.

Rose Macaulay

It is clear that the knowledge really has been assimilated—it is not a fragmentary or external thing. It is absorbed into the essence of the work and will not be found to mar its poetic values. But by a hint, a word, a turn of expression or a mental gesture, one can see that learning both scientific and humane (a significant union) has gone into the poetic crucible. There are signs which point to a whole system of philosophy: there is an historical sense, imaginatively handling the data of cosmic history; and there are traces which lead down to a basis in geology and anthropology. Yet these elements are, as I said, perfectly fused: it would be difficult to disengage them. And inimical as they may seem to the very nature of mysticism, they are constrained by this poet to contribute to her vision of a world beyond sense.

From this point of view "Trinity Sunday" is the most important poem in the book. It records an experience which the mystic of another age would have called a revelation, and which he would have apprehended through the medium of religious emotion. But this poet attains to her ultimate vision through the phenomena of the real world, apprehended in terms of the ideal. The warm breath of Spring, rich with scent and sound of the teeming earth, stirs it to awakening. But though

Contemporary Poets

she is walking in familiar Cambridge with, characteristically, the scene and time exactly placed : though friendly faces pass and cordial voices give a greeting, all that suddenly shrivels at the touch of the wild earth spirit. Space and time curl away in fold after fold ; and with them pass successive forms of strange life immensely remote. But even while reality thus terribly unfolds, it is perceived to be the *stuff of the world's live brain* ; to have existence only in idea.

And the fens were not. (For fens are dreams
Dreamt by a race long dead ;
And the earth is naught, and the sun but seems :
And so those who know have said.)

Thus the facts of science have gone to the making of this poem, as well as the theories of an idealist philosophy. It is through them both that imagination takes the forward leap. But neither the one nor the other can avail to utter the revelation ; and even the poet's remarkable gift of expression can only suffice to suggest the awfulness of it.

So veil beyond veil illimitably lifted :
And I saw the world's naked face,
Before, reeling and baffled and blind, I drifted
Back within the bounds of space.

John Masefield

THERE is one sense at least in which Mr Masefield is the most important figure amongst contemporary poets. For he has won the popular ear, he has cast the poetic spell further than any of his compeers, and it has been given to him to lure the multitudinous reader of magazines—that wary host which is usually stampeded by the sight of a page of verse.

Now I know that there are cultured persons to whom this fact of uncritical appreciation is an offence, and to them a writer bent upon purely scientific criticism would be compelled to yield certain points. But they would be mainly on finicking questions, as an occasional lapse from fineness in thought or form, an incidental banality of word or phrase ; or a lack of delicate effects of rhyme and metre. And the whole business would amount in the end to little more than a petulant complaint ; an impertinent grumble that Mr Masefield happens to be himself and not, let us say, Mr Robert Bridges ; that his individual genius has carved its own channels and that, in effect, the music of the sea or the mountain torrent does not happen to be the same thing as the plash of a fountain in a valley.

But having no quarrel with this offending popu-

Contemporary Poets

larity: rejoicing in it rather, and the new army of poetry-readers which it has created; and believing it to be an authentic sign of the poetic spirit of our day, one is tempted to seek for the cause of it. Luckily, there is a poem called "Biography" which gives a clue and something more. It is a pæan of zest for life, of the intense joy in actual living which seems to be the dynamic of Mr Masefield's genius. There is, most conspicuous and significant, delight in beauty; a swift, keen, accurate response of sense to the external world, to sea and sky and hill, to field and flower. But there is fierce delight, too, in toil and danger, in strenuous action, in desperate struggle with wind and wave, in the supreme effort of physical power, in health and strength and skill and freedom and jollity; and above all, first, last and always, in ships. But there is delight no less in communion with humanity, in comradeship, in happy memories of kindred, in still happier mental kinships and intellectual affinities, in books, in 'glittering moments' of spiritual perception, in the brooding sense of man's long history.

These are the 'golden instants and bright days' which correctly spell his life, as this poet is careful to emphasize; and we perceive that the rapture which they inspire in him, the ardour with which he takes this sea of life, is of the essence of his poetry.

John Masefield

It is seen most clearly in the lyrics ; and that is natural, since these are amongst his early work, and youth is the heyday of joy. It is found in nearly all of them, of course in varying degree, colouring substance and shaping form, evoking often a strong rhythm like a hearty voice that sings as it goes.

So hey for the road, the west road, by mill and forge
and fold,
Scent of the fern and song of the lark by brook, and
field, and wold ;

Or again, in "Tewkesbury Road,"

O, to feel the beat of the rain, and the homely smell
of the earth,
Is a tune for the blood to jig to, a joy past power
of words ;
And the blessed green comely meadows are all
a-ripple with mirth
At the noise of the lambs at play and the dear wild
cry of the birds.

And it rings in many songs of the sea, telling of its
beauty or terror, its magic and mystery and hardship,
its stately ships and tough sailormen and strange
harbourages, its breath of romance sharply tingling
with reality, its lure from which there is no escape—

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the
running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied ;

Contemporary Poets

And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds
flying,

And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the
sea-gulls crying.

Under the wistfulness of that throbs the same zest
as that which finds expression in "Laugh and be
Merry"; but the mood has become more buoyant—

Laugh and be merry, remember, better the world with
a song,

Better the world with a blow in the teeth of a wrong.

Laugh, for the time is brief, a thread the length of
a span.

Laugh and be proud to belong to the old proud
pageant of man.

Sometimes a minor key is struck, as in "Prayer;" but even here the joy is present, revealing itself in sharp regret for the beloved things of earth. It manifests itself in many ways, subtler or more obvious; but mainly I think in a questing, venturous spirit which must always be daring and seeking something beyond. Whether in the material world or the spiritual, it is always the same—whether it be sea-longing, or hunger for the City of God, or a vague faring to an unknown bourne, or the eternal quest for beauty. The poem called "The Seekers" is beautifully apt in this regard. Simply, clearly, directly, it expresses the alpha and omega of this genius: the zest which is its driving force and the

John Masefield

aspiration, the tireless and ceaseless pursuit of an ideal, which is its objective.

Not for us are content, and quiet, and peace of mind,
For we go seeking a city that we shall never find.

There is no solace on earth for us—for such as we—
Who search for a hidden city that we shall never see.

There is the spirit of adventure, the eternal allure of romance, as old and as potent as poetry itself. And surely nothing is more engaging, nothing quicker and stronger and more universal in its appeal, than zest for life finding expression in this way. In these early lyrics its spontaneous and simple utterance is very winning; but in the later narrative poems it is none the less present because, having grown a little older, it is a little more complex and not so obvious in its manifestation. Under these longer poems too runs the stream of joy, somewhat quieter now, perhaps, subdued by contemplation, brought to the test of actuality, shaping a different form through the conflict of human will, but still deep and strong, and, as in the earlier work, expressing its ultimate meaning through the spirit of high adventure.

Thus "The Widow in the Bye Street," which was the first written of these four narrative poems, is the adventure of motherhood. "Oh!" will protest some member of the dainty legion which lives

Contemporary Poets

in terror of appearances, "it is a story of lust and murder!" But no; fundamentally, triumphantly, it is a tale of mother-love, venturing all for the child. Only superficially is it a tragedy of un-governed desire and rage, made out of the incidence of character which we call destiny. The mother's spirit prevails over all that, and remains unconquerable. In "Daffodil Fields" there is the adventure of romantic passion. The "Everlasting Mercy," so obviously as hardly to need the comment, is the high adventure of the soul; and "Dauber," less clearly perhaps, though quite as certainly, is that too. But while in the first of these two poems the spirit's spark is struck into 'absolute human clay,' in "Dauber" it is burning already in the brain of an artist. Saul Kane, when his soul comes to birth at the touch of religion, puts off bestiality and rises to a joyful perception of the meaning of life. The Dauber, with that precious knowledge already shining within him, but twinned with another, the supreme and immortal glory of art, with his last breath cries holy defiance to the elements that snatch his life—*It will go on.*

But there is another reason for the popularity of this poet's work; and it also is deducible from the poem called "Biography." I mean the complete and robust humanity which is evinced there. One

John Masefield

sees, of course, that this has a close relation with the zest that we have already noted ; that it is indeed the root of that fine flower. But the balance of this personality—with power of action and of thought about equally poised, with the mystic and the humanitarian meeting half-way, with the ideal and the real twining and intertwining constantly, with sensuous and spiritual perception almost matched—determines the quality by which Mr Masefield's poems make so wide and direct an appeal. If reflectiveness were predominant, if the subjective element outran the keen dramatic sense, if the ideal were capable of easy victory over the material (it does conquer, but of that later), this would be poetry of a very different type. Whether it would be of a finer type it is idle to speculate, the point for the moment being that it would not command so large an audience. By just so far as specialization operated, the range would be made narrower.

It is this sense of humanity which wins ; not only explicit, as, for example, in the deliberate choice of subject avowed once for all in the early poem called "Consecration"—

The men of the tattered battalion which fights till
it dies,
Dazed with the dust of the battle, the din and the cries,

.

Contemporary Poets

The sailor, the stoker of steamers, the man with
the clout,

The chantyman bent at the halliards putting a tune
to the shout,

Of the maimed, of the halt and the blind in the
rain and the cold—

Of these shall my songs be fashioned, my tales be told.

There the poet is responding consciously to the time-spirit: the awakening social sense which, moving pitifully amongst bitter and ugly experience, was to evoke the outer realism of his art. That, of course, being passionately sincere, is a powerful influence. But stronger still is the unconscious force of personality, this completeness of nature which in "Biography" is seen as a rare union of powers that are nevertheless the common heritage of humanity; and which is implicit everywhere in his work, imbuing it with the compelling attraction of large human sympathy.

Out of this arise the curiously contrasted elements of Mr Masfield's poetry. For, as in life itself, and particularly in life that is full and sound, there is here a perpetual conflict between opposing forces. It is, perhaps, the most prominent characteristic of this work. It pervades it throughout, belongs to its very essence and has moulded its form. It is, of

John Masefield

course, most readily apparent in the poet's art. Here the battling forces of his genius, transferred to the creatures whom he has created, have made these narrative poems largely dramatic in form. Here, too, we come upon a clash of realism with romance and idyllic sweetness. That bald external realism has found much disfavour with those who do not or will not see its relation to the underlying reality. And one observes that the critic who professes most to dislike it hastens to quote the gaudiest example, practically ignoring the many serene and gracious passages.

But, putting aside the prejudice which has been fostered by a conventional poetic language, this realistic method does seem to conflict with certain other characteristics of the work—with the essential romance of the spirit of adventure, for instance. There does at first glance appear to be a disturbing lack of unity between that ardent, wistful and elusive spirit, and the grim actuality here, of incident and diction ; or, on the other hand, between the raw material of this verse and its elaborate metrical form, or its frequent passages of rare and delicate beauty. But is it more than an appearance ? I think not. I believe that the incongruity exists only in a canon of poetical taste which is false to the extent that it is based too narrowly. That canon has appro-

Contemporary Poets

priated romance to a certain order of themes and, almost as exclusively, to a certain manner of expression. Most of our contemporary poets have cheerfully repudiated the convention so far as it governed language ; building up, each for himself, a fresh, rich, expressive idiom in which the magic of romance is often vividly recreated. Some of them, and Mr Masfield pre-eminently, have gone further. They have perceived the potential romance of all life, and have broken down the old limit which prescribed to the poet only graceful figures and pseudo-heroic themes. They have set themselves to express the wonder and mystery, the ecstasy and exaltation which inhere, however obscurely, in the lowliest human existence.

Thus we have Saul Kane, the village wastrel of "The Everlasting Mercy," glimpsing his heritage, for a moment, in a lucid interval of a drunken orgy. Suddenly, for a marvellous instant, he is made aware of beauty, smitten into consciousness of himself and a fugitive apprehension of reality.

I opened window wide and leaned
Out of that pigstye of the fiend
And felt a cool wind go like grace
About the sleeping market-place.
The clock struck three, and sweetly, slowly,
The bells chimed Holy, Holy, Holy ;

John Masefield

And summat made me think of things.
How long those ticking clocks had gone
From church and chapel, on and on,
Ticking the time out, ticking slow
To men and girls who'd come and go,

.

And how a change had come. And then
I thought, "You tick to different men."
What with the fight and what with drinking
And being awake alone there thinking,
My mind began to carp and tetter,
"If this life's all, the beasts are better."

The elements of that passage, and cumulatively to its end, are genuinely romantic : the heightened mood, the night setting of darkness and solemnity, the wondering and regretful gaze into the past, and the sense of eternal mystery. So, too, though from a very different aspect, is the amazing power of the mad scene in this poem. The fierce zest of it courses along a flaming pathway and is as exhilarating in its speed and vigour as any romantic masterpiece in the older manner. It is difficult to quote, in justice to the author, from so closely woven a texture; but there is a short passage which illustrates over again the physical development that we have already noted balancing mental and spiritual qualities in this genius. It is the exultation of Kane in

Contemporary Poets

his swiftness, as he rages through the streets with a crowd toiling after him.

The men who don't know to the root
The joy of being swift of foot,
Have never known divine and fresh
The glory of the gift of flesh,
Nor felt the feet exult, nor gone
Along a dim road, on and on,
Knowing again the bursting glows,
The mating hare in April knows,
Who tingles to the pads with mirth
At being the swiftest thing on earth.
O, if you want to know delight,
Run naked in an autumn night,
And laugh, as I laughed then. . . .

The sensuous ecstasy of that is as strongly contrasted with the pensiveness of the previous scene at the window as it is with the gentle rhapsody which follows the drunkard's conversion. Of that rhapsody what can one say? It is a piece about which words seem inadequate, or totally futile. Perhaps one comment may be made, however. Reading it for the twentieth time, and marvelling once more at the religious emotion which, in its naïve sweetness and intensity is so strange an apparition in our day, my mind flew, with a sudden sense of enlightenment, back to Chaucer. At first, reflection made the transition seem abrupt to absurdity; but

208

John Masefield

the connexion had no doubt been helped subconsciously by the apt fragment from Lydgate on the fly-leaf of this poem. Thence it was but a step to the large humanity, the sympathy and tolerance and generosity, the wide understanding bred of practical knowledge of men and affairs, of the father of poets. An actual likeness gleamed which was at the same time piquant and satisfying. For, first, it stimulated curiosity regarding the use by this poet of the Chaucerian rhyme-royal in three of these long poems. That evinces a leaning on traditional form rather curious in so independent an artist. And then it teased the mind with suggestions that led out of range—about mental affinities, and the different manifestations of the same type of genius, born into ages so far apart.

It is not, of course, a question of exact or direct comparison between, let us say, the *Canterbury Tales* and these narrative poems of the twentieth century. It is rather a matter of the spirit of the whole work, of the personality and its reaction to life, which satisfy one individual at least of a resemblance. Of course it is not easily susceptible of proof; but there are passages from the two poets which in thought, feeling, and even manner of expression, will almost form a parallel. Consider this stanza from a minor poem of Chaucer,

Contemporary Poets

a prayer to the Virgin in the quaint form of an
"A. B. C."

Xristus, thy sone, that in this world alighte,
Up-on the cros to suffre his passioun,
And eek, that Longius his herte pighte,
And made his herte blood to renne adoun ;
And al was this for my salvacioun ;
And I to him am fals and eek unkinde,
And yit he wol not my dampnacioun—
This thanke I you, socour of al mankinde.

The childlike faith of that, the quiet rapture of adoration, the abandon and simple confidence, are curiously matched by the following passage from "The Everlasting Mercy." Saul Kane has found his soul in the mystical re-birth of Christianity, and dawn coming across the fields lightens all his world with new significance.

O Christ who holds the open gate,
O Christ who drives the furrow straight,
O Christ, the plough, O Christ, the laughter
Of holy white birds flying after,
Lo, all my heart's field red and torn,
And Thou wilt bring the young green corn,
The young green corn divinely springing,
The young green corn for ever singing ;
And when the field is fresh and fair
Thy blessèd feet shall glitter there.
And we will walk the weeded field,
And tell the golden harvest's yield,

John Masefield

The corn that makes the holy bread
By which the soul of man is fed,
The holy bread, the food unpriced,
Thy everlasting mercy, Christ.

So one might go on to contrast the several characteristics of this poetry, and to trace them back to the combination of qualities in the author's genius. This elemental religious emotion, dramatically fitted as it is to the character, could only have found such expression by a mind which deeply felt the primary human need of religion, and which was relatively untroubled by abstract philosophy. But set over against that is the almost pagan joy in the senses, the vigour and love of action which make so strong a physical basis to this work ; whilst, on the other hand, there stands the astonishing contrast between the lyrical intensity of the idyllic passages of these poems ; and the dramatic power (at once identified with humanity and detached from it) which has created characters of ardent vitality.

There is, of course, a corresponding technical contrast ; but the fact that it does 'correspond' is an answer to the critics who object to the violence of certain scenes or to a literal rendering here and there of thought or word. Granted that this poet is not much concerned to polish or refine his verse, it remains true that the same sense of fitness which

Contemporary Poets

closes three of these tragedies in exquisite serenity, governs elsewhere an occasional crudity of expression or a touch of banality. It is largely—though not always—a question of dramatic truth. The medium is related to the material of this poetry and ruled by its moods. Hence its realism is not an external or arbitrary thing. It is something more than a trick of style or the adoption of a literary mode, being indeed a living form evolved by the reality which the poet has designed to express.

The root of the matter lies in a stanza of "Dauber." The young artist-seaman, who is the protagonist here, has for long been patiently toiling at his art at the prompting of instinct—the æsthetic impulse to capture and make permanent the beauty of the material world. But the pressure of reality upon him, the unimaginable hardships of a sailor's existence, have threatened to crush his spirit. A crisis of physical fear and depression has supervened; terror of the storms that the ship must soon encounter, of the frightful peril of his work aloft, and of the brutality of his shipmates, has shaken him to the soul. For a moment, even his art is obscured, shrouded and almost lost in the whirl of these overmastering realities. But when it emerges from the chaos it brings revelation to the painter of its own inviolable relation with those same realities.

John Masefield

. . . a thought occurred
Within the painter's brain like a bright bird :

That this, and so much like it, of man's toil,
Compass'd by naked manhood in strange places,
Was all heroic, but outside the coil
Within which modern art gleams or grimaces ;
That if he drew that line of sailors' faces
Sweating the sail, their passionate play and change,
It would be new, and wonderful, and strange.

That that was what his work meant ; it would be
A training in new vision. . . .

One might almost accept that as Mr Masefield's own confession of artistic faith ; it only needs the substitution of the word 'poet' for the word 'painter' in the second line. But it is not quite complete as it stands ; and an important article of it will be discovered by reading this poem through and noting the triumph of the ideal over the real, which is the essential meaning of the work. It is not the most obvious interpretation, perhaps. The idealist broken by the elements, wasted and thrown aside, is hardly a victorious figure on the face of things. But, in spite of that, the poem is a song of victory—of spirit over matter, of the ideal over reality, of art over life.

The fact is all the more remarkable when we turn for a moment to note the poet's grip on facts. We

Contemporary Poets

have just seen that profound sense of reality lying at the base of his technical realism; and it has been won, through a comprehensive experience, by virtue of the balance of his equipment. There is no bias here, of mind or spirit, which would have changed the clear humanity of the poet into the philosopher or the mystic. The naïveté and simple concrete imagery in the expression of religious feeling are far removed from mysticism. And, on the other hand, one cannot conceive of Mr Masfield formally ranged with the abstractions of either the materialist or the idealist school. Yet it is true that "Dauber" raises the practical issue between the two; and because the poet has realized life profoundly and dares to tell the truth about it, the triumph of the ideal is the more complete. He shows his hero scourged by the elements until all sense is lost but that of physical torture—

. . . below

He caught one giddy glimpsing of the deck
Filled with white water, as though heaped with snow.

. . . all was an icy blast.

Roaring from nether hell and filled with ice,
Roaring and crashing on the jerking stage,
An utter bridle given to utter vice,
Limitless power mad with endless rage
Withering the soul;

John Masefield

With greater daring still we are shown the spirit itself, cowering in temporary defeat before material force—

“This is the end,” he muttered, “come at last !

I’ve got to go aloft, facing this cold.

I can’t. I can’t. I’ll never keep my hold.

. . . I’m a failure. All

My life has been a failure. They were right.

. . .
I’ll never paint. Best let it end to-night.

I’ll slip over the side. I’ve tried and failed.”

And then, finally, the poet does not shrink from the last and grimmest reality. He seems to say—Let material force do its utmost against this man. Admit the most dreadful possibility ; shatter the life, with its fine promise, its aspiration and toil and precious perception of beauty, and fling it to the elements which claim it. Nevertheless the spirit will conquer, as it has won in the long fight hitherto and will continue to win. When the Dauber had been goaded almost beyond endurance by the cruelty of his shipmates, and when their taunts had availed at last to conjure in him a sickening doubt of his vocation, the poet represents him as turning instinctively to his easel, and healed in a moment of all the abasement and derision—

Contemporary Poets

He dipped his brush and tried to fix a line,
And then came peace, and gentle beauty came,
Turning his spirit's water into wine,
Lightening his darkness with a touch of flame :

So, too, when the horror of the storm and the immense danger of his work aloft had shaken his manhood for a moment : when he saw his life as one ' long defeat of doing nothing well ' and death seemed an easy escape from it, a rallying cry from the spirit sent him to face his duty :

And then he bit his lips, clenching his mind,
And staggered out to muster, beating back
The coward frozen self of him that whined.

And in the last extremity, when he lay upon the deck broken by his fall and rapidly slipping back into the eternal silence, the ideal gleamed before him still. *It will go on!* he cried ; and the four small words, considered in their setting, with the weight of the story behind them, have deep significance. For they bring a challenge to reality from a poet who has very clearly apprehended it ; and in their triumphant idealism they put the corner-stone upon his philosophy and his art.

Harold Monro

THE poetry of Mr Monro—that which counts most, the later work—is of so fine a texture and so subtle a perfume that its charm may elude the average reader. It is, moreover, very individual in its form; and the unusual element in it, which is yet not sufficiently bizarre to snatch attention, may tend to repel even the poetry lover. That person, as we know, still prefers to take his poetry in the traditional manner; and hence the audience for work like this, delicately sensitive and quietly thoughtful, is likely to be small. It will be fully appreciative, however, gladly exchanging stormy raptures for a serene and satisfying beauty; and it will be of a temper which will delight to trace in this work, subdued almost to a murmur, the same influences which are urging some of his contemporaries to louder, more emphatic, and more copious expression.

A particular interest of this poetry is precisely the way in which those influences have been subdued. It is that which gives the individual stamp to its art; but, curiously, it is also that which marks its heredity, and defines its place in the succession of English poetry. There is independence here, but not isolation; nor is there violent conflict with

Contemporary Poets

an older poetic ideal. On the contrary, a reconciliation has been made ; balance has been attained ; and revolutionary principles, whether in the region of technique or ideas, have been harnessed and controlled. So that this work, while fairly representing the new poetry, is clearly related in the direct line to the old. A little " Impression," one of a group at the end of the volume called *Before Dawn*, will illustrate this :

She was young and blithe and fair,
Firm of purpose, sweet and strong,
Perfect was her crown of hair,
Perfect most of all her song.

Yesterday beneath an oak,
She was chanting in the wood :
Wandering harmonies awoke ;
Sleeping echoes understood.

To-day without a song, without a word,
She seems to drag one piteous fallen wing
Along the ground, and, like a wounded bird,
Move silent, having lost the heart to sing.

She was young and blithe and fair,
Firm of purpose, sweet and strong,
Perfect was her crown of hair,
Perfect most of all her song.

One may cite a piece like that, breaking away, in the third stanza, to a freer and more fitting rhythm, as an example of the normal development

Harold Monro

of English prosody. And that is, perhaps, the final significance of Mr Monro's work. With less temptation to waywardness than a more exuberant genius, he has achieved a completer harmony. But it was not so easy a task as the quiet manner would cheat one into supposing ; and, of course, it has not always been so successfully done. There are many pieces—beautiful nevertheless—where external influences have not been completely subdued. From them one may measure the strength with which contemporary thought claims this poet. For it appears that he, too, cannot be at ease in Zion ; that he is troubled and ashamed by reason of a social conscience ; that he is haunted by an unappeasable questioning spirit ; that he is perpetually seeking after the spiritual element in existence. Indeed, so clear and persistent is this last motive, that if one were aiming epithets it would be possible to fit the word ' religious ' to the essential nature of Mr Monro's poetry. Of course, no poet, be he great or small, can be packed into the compass of a single word. His work will mean much more, and sometimes greatly different from that. And the word religious in this connexion is more than usually hazardous, for almost all the connotations are against it. It is true that the common meaning, bandied on the lips of happy irresponsibles, has no

Contemporary Poets

application here. On the contrary, it seems sometimes completely reversed; and the good unthinking folk would find themselves nonplussed by such a piece as that called "The Poets are Waiting," in the chapbook which Mr Munro published at the end of 1914. Yet it is of the essence of religion; and it most faithfully presents the spiritual crisis which was precipitated by the Great War for many who had clung to a last vague hope of some intelligent providence—

To what God
Shall we chant
Our songs of Battle ?

Hefty barbarians,
Roaring for war,
Are breaking upon us ;
Clouds of their cavalry,
Waves of their infantry,
Mountains of guns.
Winged they are coming,
Plated and mailed,
Snorting their jargon.
Oh to whom shall a song of battle be chanted ?

Not to our lord of the hosts on his ancient throne,
Drowsing the ages out in Heaven alone.
The celestial choirs are mute, the angels have fled :
Word is gone forth abroad that our lord is dead.

Harold Monro

To what God
Shall we chant
Our songs of Battle ?

I do not wish to stress unduly the spiritual element in this work, but it compels attention for two reasons. It is a dominant impulse, supplying themes which occur early and late and often ; and the manner of its expression reveals a link with the past generation which is analogous to the technical connexion that we have already noted.

The signs of descent from the Victorians are naturally to be found in the early poems. There is, for example, the inevitable classic theme treated in the (also inevitable) romantic manner, and making a charming combination, despite the grumblings of the realist and the pedant. That, however, is a very obvious and external mark of descent. A more interesting sign is in the spirit of "A Song at Dawn," a wail to the Power of Powers which the author probably wishes to forget. So I will not quote it. The point about it is the celerity with which it sends thought flying back to Matthew Arnold and "Dover Beach." Yet there is an important difference. For whilst the Victorian muses upon the decay of faith with exquisite mournfulness, the 'Georgian' takes an attitude of greater detachment. Instead of grieving for a dead or dying

Contemporary Poets

system of theology, he seeks to question the reality which lies behind it.

In the volume of 1911, called *Before Dawn*, there are several poems which pursue the same quest. Sometimes the method is one of provocative directness, as in the dramatic piece called "God"; and at other times it is by way of symbol or suggestion, as in "Moon-worshippers" or "Two Visions." From the nature of things, however, the pieces in which the argumentative attitude is taken are the less satisfying, as poetry. Thus the colloquy in "God" just fails, from the polemical theme, of being truly dramatic; while, on the other hand, its form prevents it from rising into such lovely lyricism as that of "The Last Abbot." In the former poem we are to imagine all sorts and conditions of people coming in and out of an old English tavern on market day; and all of them ready and willing to enlighten a travel-stained pilgrim there as to "Who and what is God?" One sees the allegory, of course; but, somehow, that is less convincing than the touches of satirical portraiture which we find in passing, and which point to this poet's gift of objectivity. The judge and the priest, the soldier and sailor and farmer, the beggar, thief and merchant, are presented mainly as types: that, of course, being demanded by the

Harold Monro

allegory. And when a poet arrives to solve the problem, he also speaks 'in character'—though we recognize the voice for one more modern than his reputed age.

. . . God is a spirit, not a creed ;
He is an inner outward-moving power :

.
He is that one Desire, that life, that breath,
That Soul which, with infinity of pain,
Passes through revelation and through death
Onward and upward to itself again.

Out of the lives of heroes and their deeds,
Out of the miracle of human thought,
Out of the songs of singers, God proceeds ;
And of the soul of them his Soul is wrought.

There follows a quick clatter of disputation, broken by the entrance of the philosopher ; and the pilgrim's question being put to him, he replies—

God ? God ! There is no GOD.

Thus 'the spirit that denies' abruptly shatters the poetic vision ; and the artistic effect is, correspondingly, to break the music of the previous stanzas with a sudden discord. The design of the work required that the philosopher should be heard, and dramatic fitness suggested that his most effective entrance would be here, rending the fair

Contemporary Poets

new synthesis with denial. And the resulting dissonance is inherent in the very scheme of the poem.

That defect does not appear in "The Last Abbot," which is also engaged upon the thought of the universal soul. Here an old monk, knowing that he is drawing near the end of life, quietly talks to the brethren of his order about life and death and after-death. There is no argument, no discussion even. No other voice is raised to interrupt the meditative flow of the old man's message, which is, in fact, a recantation. And, as a consequence, the poem has a unity of serene reflectiveness, rising at times to lyrical ecstasy. He is thinking of his approaching death—

Oh, I, with light and airy change,
Across the azure sky shall range,
When I am dead.

.

I shall be one
Of all the misty, fresh and healing powers.
Dew I shall be, and fragrance of the morn,
And quietly shall lie dreaming all the noon,
Or oft shall sparkle underneath the moon,
A million times shall die and be reborn,
Because the sun again and yet again
Shall snatch me softly from the earth away :
I shall be rain ;
I shall be spray ;

Harold Monro

At night shall oft among the misty shades
Pass dreamily across the open lea ;
And I shall live in the loud cascades,
Pouring their waters into the sea.
. . . Nought can die :
All belongs to the living Soul,
Makes, and partakes, and is the whole,
All—and therefore, I.

So much then for the poet's cosmic theory, presented more or less directly. This explicit treatment may, as we see, give individual passages where thought and feeling are completely fused, and the idea gets itself born into a shape sufficiently concrete for the breath of poetry to live in it. But the final effect of such poems is apt to be dimmed by the shadow of controversy. A subtler method is used, however, justified in a finer type of art. In "Don Juan in Hell," for instance, there is a symbolical presentment of the theme : a conception of life which is a corollary from the poet's theory of the universe. Don Juan is here an incarnation of the vital forces of the world, of the positive value and power of life which is in eternal conflict with a religion of negation. And, a new-comer among the shades in Hell, he turns his scorn upon them for the lascivious passion which found it necessary to invent sin.

Contemporary Poets

Light, light your fires,
That they may purify your own desires !
They will not injure me.
This fire of mine
Was kindled from the torch that will outshine
Eternity.

.
Proud, you disclaim
That fair desire from which all came ;
Unworthy of your lofty human birth,
Despise the earth.
O crowd funereal,
Lifting your anxious brows because of sin,
There is no Heaven such as you would win,
Nor any other Paradise at all,
Save in fulfilling some superb desire
With all the spirit's fire.

The same idea is woven into "Moon-worshippers," with delicate grace. It constitutes a precise charge, in the poem "To Tolstoi," that the great idealist has forsworn the 'holy way of life'; and, recurring in many forms more or less explicit, culminates in the charming allegory called "Children of Love." This is a later poem, mature in thought and masterly in form. The theme is by this time a familiar one to the poet : he has considered it deeply and often. And having gone through the crucible so many times, it is now of a fineness and plasticity to be

Harold Monro

handled with ease. It runs into the symbolism here so lightly as hardly to awaken an echo of after-thought, and shapes to an allegory much too winning to provoke controversy. The first two stanzas of the poem imagine the boy Jesus walking dreamily under the olives in the cool of the evening :

Suddenly came
Running along to him naked, with curly hair,
That rogue of the lovely world,
That other beautiful child whom the virgin Venus bare.

The holy boy
Gazed with those sad blue eyes that all men know.
Impudent Cupid stood
Panting, holding an arrow and pointing his bow.

(Will you not play ?
Jesus, run to him, run to him, swift for our joy.
Is he not holy, like you ?
Are you afraid of his arrows, O beautiful dreaming boy?)

Marvellous dream !
Cupid has offered his arrows for Jesus to try ;
He has offered his bow for the game.
But Jesus went weeping away, and left him there
wondering why.

That may be taken as Mr Monro's most representative poem. On our theory, therefore (of this

Contemporary Poets

work as a link with the older school), the piece might serve to indicate the point which contemporary poetry has reached, advancing in technique and in thought straight from the previous generation. Not that it is the most 'advanced' piece (in the specific sense of the word) which one could cite from modern poets. Many and strange have been the theories evolved on independent lines, just as numerous weird technical effects have been gained by breaking altogether with the tradition of native prosody. But Mr. Monro's poetry continues the tradition; and whether it be in content or in form, it has pushed forward, in the normal manner of healthy growth, from the stage immediately preceding.

The new technical features are clear enough, and all owe their origin to a determination to gain the greatest possible freedom within the laws of English versification. Rhyme is no longer a merely decorative figure, gorgeous but tyrannical. It is an instrument of potential range and power, to be used with restraint by an austere artist. In "Children of Love" it occurs just often enough to convey the gentle sadness of the emotional atmosphere. But very beautiful effects are gained without it, as, for instance, in another of these later poems, called "Great City"—

Harold Monro

When I returned at sunset,
The serving-maid was singing softly
Under the dark stairs, and in the house
Twilight had entered like a moonray.
Time was so dead I could not understand
The meaning of midday or of midnight,
But like falling waters, falling, hissing, falling,
Silence seemed an everlasting sound.

The verse is not now commonly marked by an exact number of syllables or feet, nor the stanza divided into a regular number of verses, except where the subject requires precision of effect. An order of recurrence does exist, however, giving the definite form essential to poetry. But it is determined by factors which make for greater naturalness and flexibility than the hard-and-fast division into ten- or eight-foot lines and stanzas of a precise pattern. The ruling influences now are various—the thought which is to be expressed, and the phases through which it passes: the nature and strength of the emotion, the ebb and flow of the poetic impulse.

Thus, while metrical rhythm is retained, it has been freed from its former monotonous regularity, and has become almost infinitely varied. The dissyllable, dominant hitherto, has taken a much humbler place. Every metre into which English

Contemporary Poets

words will run is now adopted, and fresh combinations are constantly being made ; while upon the poetic rhythm itself is super-imposed the natural rhythm of speech. In most of these devices Mr Monro, and others, are presumably following the precept and example of the Laureate ; but in any case there can be no doubt of the richness, suppleness, and variety of the metrical effects attained. Most of the pieces in this little chapbook illustrate at some point the influence of untrammelled speech-rhythm ; and in one, called "Hearthstone," it is rather accentuated. I quote from the poem for that reason : the slight excess will enable the device to be observed more readily, but will not obscure other characteristic qualities which are clearly marked here—of tenderness, quiet tone, and delicate colouring.

I want nothing but your fireside now.

.
Your book has dropped unnoticed : you have read
So long you cannot send your brain to bed.
The low quiet room and all its things are caught
And linger in the meshes of your thought.
(Some people think they know time cannot pause.)
Your eyes are closing now though not because
Of sleep. You are searching something with your
brain ;
You have let the old dog's paw drop down again . . .

Harold Monro

Now suddenly you hum a little catch,
And pick up the book. The wind rattles the latch ;
There's a patter of light cool rain and the curtain
shakes ;
The silly dog growls, moves, and almost wakes.
The kettle near the fire one moment hums.
Then a long peace upon the whole room comes.
So the sweet evening will draw to its bedtime end.
I want nothing now but your fireside, friend.

Thus the technique of modern poetry would seem to be moving towards a more exact rendering of the music and the meaning of our language. That is to say, there is, in prosody itself, an impulse towards truth of expression, which may be found to correspond to the heightened sense of external fact in contemporary poetic genius, as well as to its closer hold upon reality. Thence comes the realism of much good poetry now being written : triune, as all genuine realism must be, since it proceeds out of a spiritual conviction, a mental process and actual craftsmanship. That Mr Monro's work is also trending in this direction, almost every piece in his last little book will testify. And if it seem a surprising fact, that is only because one has found it necessary to quote from the more subjective of his early lyrics. It would have been possible, out of the narrative called " Judas," or the " Impressions " at the end of *Before Dawn*, to indicate this poet's

Contemporary Poets

objective power. He has a gift of detachment ; of cool and exact observation ; and to this is joined a dexterity of satiric touch which serves indignation well. Hence the portraits of the epicure at the Carlton and the city swindler in the rôle of county gentleman. Hence, too, poems like "The Virgin" or "A Suicide" : though here it is unfortunate that imagination has been allowed to play upon abnormal subjects. The result may be an acute psychological study ; and interesting on that account. But if it is to be a choice between two extremes, most people will prefer work in which fantasy has gone off to a region in the opposite direction. There is one poem in which this bizarre sprite has taken holiday ; and thence comes the piece of glimmering unreality called "Overheard on a Saltmarsh."

Nymph, nymph, what are your beads ?
Green glass, goblin. Why do you stare at them ?
Give them me.

No.

Give them me. Give them me.

No.

Then I will howl all night in the reeds,
Lie in the mud and howl for them.

Goblin, why do you love them so ?

Harold Monro

They are better than stars or water,
Better than voices of winds that sing,
Better than any man's fair daughter,
Your green glass beads on a silver ring.

Hush I stole them out of the moon.

Give me your beads, I desire them.

No.

I will howl in a deep lagoon
For your green glass beads, I love them so.
Give them me. Give them.

No.

But in his more representative work, the intellectual realism which comes from an acute sense of fact is clearly operative. We have seen, too, from the earliest published verse of this poet, the continual struggle of what one may call a religion of reality—belief in the sanctity and beauty and value of the real world—for spiritual mastery. In the later poems the two elements become deepened and are more closely combined : they are, too, seeking expression through a technique which is directed to the same realistic purpose. And as a result we get such a piece of quiet fidelity as “London Interior” ; or a tragedy like “Carrion,” in which the logic of life and death, controlling emotion with beautiful gravity, is suddenly broken by a sob. It is the last of four war-poems ; a series representing the

Contemporary Poets

call of battle to the soldier, his departure, a fighting retreat, and finally, in "Carrion," his death—

It is plain now what you are. Your head has dropped
Into a furrow. And the lovely curve
Of your strong leg has wasted and is propped
Against a ridge of the ploughed land's watery swerve.

.
You are fuel for a coming spring if they leave you here ;
The crop that will rise from your bones is healthy
bread.

You died—we know you—without a word of fear,
And as they loved you living I love you dead.

No girl would kiss you. But then
No girls would ever kiss the earth
In the manner they hug the lips of men :
You are not known to them in this, your second birth.

.
Hush, I hear the guns. Are you still asleep ?
Surely I saw you a little heave to reply.
I can hardly think you will not turn over and creep
Along the furrows trenchward as if to die.

Sarojini Naidu

MRS NAIDU is one of the two Indian poets who within the last few years have produced remarkable English poetry. The second of the two is, of course, Rabindranath Tagore, whose work has come to us a little later, who has published more, and whose recent visit to this country has brought him more closely under the public eye. Mrs Naidu is not so well known ; but she deserves to be, for although the bulk of her work is not so large, its quality, so far as it can be compared with that of her compatriot, will easily bear the test. It is, however, so different in kind, and reveals a genius so contrasting, that one is piqued by an apparent problem. How is it that two children of what we are pleased to call the changeless East, under conditions nearly identical, should have produced results which are so different ?

Both of these poets are lyrists born ; both come of an old and distinguished Bengali ancestry ; in both the culture of East and West are happily met ; and both are working in the same artistic medium. Yet the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore is mystical, philosophic, and contemplative, remaining oriental therefore to that degree ; and permitting a doubt of the *Quarterly* reviewer's dictum that " Gitanjali "

Contemporary Poets

is a synthesis of western and oriental elements. The complete synthesis would seem to rest with Mrs Naidu, whose poetry, though truly native to her motherland, is more sensuous than mystical, human and passionate rather than spiritual, and reveals a mentality more active than contemplative. Her affiliation with the Occident is so much the more complete ; but her Eastern origin is never in doubt.

The themes of her verse and their setting are derived from her own country. But her thought, with something of the energy of the strenuous West and something of its 'divine discontent,' plays upon the surface of an older and deeper calm which is her birthright. So, in her "Salutation to the Eternal Peace," she sings

What care I for the world's loud weariness,
Who dream in twilight granaries Thou dost bless
With delicate sheaves of mellow silences ?

Two distinguished poet-friends of Mrs Naidu—Mr Edmund Gosse and Mr Arthur Symonds—have introduced her two principal volumes of verse with interesting biographical notes. The facts thus put in our possession convey a picture to the mind which is instantly recognizable in the poems. A gracious and glowing personality appears, quick and warm with human feeling, exquisitely sensitive to beauty and

Sarojini Naidu

receptive of ideas, wearing its culture, old and new, scientific and humane, with simplicity ; but, as Mr Symons says, “ a spirit of too much fire in too frail a body,” and one moreover who has suffered and fought to the limit of human endurance.

We hear of birth and childhood in Hyderabad ; of early scientific training by a father whose great learning was matched by his public spirit : of a first poem at the age of eleven, written in an impulse of reaction when a sum in algebra ‘ *would not* come right ’ : of coming to England at the age of sixteen with a scholarship from the Nizam college ; and of three years spent here, studying at King’s College, London, and at Girton, with glorious intervals of holiday in Italy.

We hear, too, of a love-story that would make an idyll ; of passion so strong and a will so resolute as almost to be incredible in such a delicate creature ; of a marriage in defiance of caste, a few years of brilliant happiness and then a tragedy. And all through, as a dark background to the adventurous romance of her life, there is the shadow of weakness and ill-health. That shadow creeps into her poems, impressively, now and then. Indeed, if it were lacking, the bright oriental colouring would be almost too vivid. So, apart from its psychological and human interest, we may be thankful for such a

Contemporary Poets

poem as "To the God of Pain." It softens and deepens the final impression of the work.

For thy dark altars, balm nor milk nor rice,
But mine own soul thou'st ta'en for sacrifice.

The poem is purely subjective, of course, as is the still more moving piece, "The Poet to Death," in the same volume.

Tarry a while, till I am satisfied
Of love and grief, of earth and altering sky ;
Till all my human hungers are fulfilled,
O Death, I cannot die !

We know that that is a cry out of actual and repeated experience ; and from that point of view alone it has poignant interest. But what are we to say about the spirit of it—the philosophy which is implicit in it ? Here is an added value of a higher kind, evidence of a mind which has taken its own stand upon reality, and which has no easy consolations when confronting the facts of existence. For this mind, neither the religions of East nor West are allowed to veil the truth ; neither the hope of Nirvana nor the promise of Paradise may drug her sense of the value of life nor darken her perception of the beauty of phenomena. Resignation and renunciation are alike impossible to this ardent being who loves the earth so passionately ; but the ' sternly

Sarojini Naidu

scientific ' nature of that early training—the description is her own—has made futile regret impossible, too. She has entered into full possession of the thought of our time ; and strongly individual as she is, she has evolved for herself, to use her own words, a “subtle philosophy of living from moment to moment.” That is no shallow epicureanism, however, for as she sings in a poem contrasting our changeful life with the immutable peace of the Buddha on his lotus-throne—

Nought shall conquer or control
The heavenward hunger of our soul.

It is as though, realizing that the present is the only moment of which we are certain, she had determined to crowd that moment to the utmost limit of living.

From such a philosophy, materialism of a nobler kind, one would expect a love of the concrete and tangible, a delight in sense impressions, and quick and strong emotion. Those are, in fact, the characteristics of much of the poetry in these two volumes, *The Golden Threshold* and *The Bird of Time*. The beauty of the material world, of line and especially of colour, is caught and recorded joyously. Life is regarded mainly from the outside, in action, or as a pageant ; as an interesting event or a picturesque group. It is not often brooded over, and reflection

Contemporary Poets

is generally evident in but the lightest touches. The proportion of strictly subjective verse is small, and is not, on the whole, the finest work technically.

The introspective note seems unfavourable to Mrs Naidu's art : naturally so, one would conclude, from the buoyant temperament that is revealed. The love-songs are perhaps an exception, for one or two, which (as we know) treat fragments of the poet's own story, are fine in idea and in technique alike. There is, for example, "An Indian Love Song," in the first stanza of which the lover begs for his lady's love. But she reminds him of the barriers of caste between them ; she is afraid to profane the laws of her father's creed ; and her lover's kinsmen, in times past, have broken the altars of her people and slaughtered their sacred kine. The lover replies :

What are the sins of my race, Beloved, what are my
people to thee ?
And what are thy shrine, and kine and kindred, what are
thy gods to me ?
Love recks not of feuds and bitter follies, of stranger,
comrade or kin,
Alike in his ear sound the temple bells and the cry of
the *muezzin*.

There is also in the second volume the "Dirge," in which the poet mourns the death of the husband

Sarojini Naidu

whom she had dared to marry against the laws of caste ; and which almost unconsciously reveals the influence of centuries of Suttee upon the mind of Indian womanhood.

Shatter her shining bracelets, break the string
Threading the mystic marriage-beads that cling
Loth to desert a sobbing throat so sweet,
Unbind the golden anklets on her feet,
Divest her of her azure veils and cloud
Her living beauty in a living shroud.

Even here, however, the effect is gained by colour and movement ; by the grouping of images rather than by the development of an idea ; and that will be found to be Mrs Naidu's method in the many delightful lyrics of these volumes where she is most successful. The " Folk Songs " of her first book are an example. One assumes that they are early work, partly because they are the first group in the earlier of the two volumes ; but more particularly because they adopt so literally the advice which Mr Edmund Gosse gave her at the beginning of her career. When she came as a girl to England and was a student of London University at King's College, she submitted to Mr Gosse a bundle of manuscript poems. He describes them as accurate and careful work, but too derivative ; modelled too palpably on the great poets of the

Contemporary Poets

previous generation. His advice, therefore, was that they should be destroyed, and that the author should start afresh upon native themes and in her own manner. The counsel was exactly followed: the manuscript went into the wastepaper basket, and the poet set to work on what we cannot doubt is this first group of songs made out of the lives of her own people.

There is all the hemisphere between these lyrics and those of late-Victorian England. Here we find a "Village Song" of a mother to the little bride who is still all but a baby; and to whom the fairies call so insistently that she will not stay "for bridal songs and bridal cakes and sandal-scented leisure." In the song of the "Palanquin Bearers" we positively see the lithe and rhythmic movements which bear some Indian beauty along, lightly "as a pearl on a string." And there is a song written to one of the tunes of those native minstrels who wander, free and wild as the wind, singing of

The sword of old battles, the crown of old kings,
And happy and simple and sorrowful things.

The "Harvest Hymn" raises thanksgiving for strange bounties to gods of unfamiliar names; and the "Cradle Song" evokes a tropical night, heavy with scent and drenched with dew—

Sarojini Naidu

Sweet, shut your eyes,
The wild fire-flies
Dance through the fairy *neem* ;
From the poppy-bole,
For you I stole
A little, lovely dream.

In its lightness and grace, this poem is one of the exquisite things in our language : one of the little lyric flights, like William Watson's " April," which in their clear sweetness and apparent spontaneity are like some small bird's song. Mrs Naidu has said of herself—" I sing just as the birds do " ; and as regards her loveliest lyrics (there are a fair proportion of them) she speaks a larger truth than she meant. Their simplicity and abandonment to the sheer joy of singing are infinitely refreshing ; and fragile though they seem, one suspects them of great vitality. In the later volume there is another called " Golden Cassia "—the bright blooms that her people call mere ' woodland flowers.' The poet has other fancies about them ; sometimes they seem to her like fragments of a fallen star—

Or golden lamps for a fairy shrine,
Or golden pitchers for fairy wine.
Perchance you are, O frail and sweet !
Bright anklet-bells from the wild spring's feet,
Or the gleaming tears ~~that~~ some fair bride shed
Remembering her lost maidenhead.

Contemporary Poets

The tenderness and delicacy of verse like that might mislead us. We might suppose that the qualities of Mrs Naidu's work were only those which are arbitrarily known as feminine. But this poet, like Mrs Browning, is faithful to her own sensuous and passionate temperament. She has not timidly sheltered behind a convention which, because some women-poets have been austere, prescribes austerity, neutral tones, and a pale light for the woman-artist in this sphere. And, as a result, we have all the evidence of a richly-dowered sensibility responding frankly to the vivid light and colour, the liberal contours and rich scents and great spaces of the world she loves ; and responding no less warmly and freely to human instincts. Occasionally her verse achieves the expression of sheer sensuous ecstasy. It does that, perhaps, in the two Dance poems—from the very reason that her art is so true and free. The theme requires exactly that treatment ; and in "Indian Dancers" there is besides a curiously successful union between the measure that is employed and the subject of the poem—

 Their glittering garments of purple are burning like
 tremulous dawns in the quivering air,
And exquisite, subtle and slow are the tinkle and tread
 of their rhythmical, slumber-soft feet.

Sarojini Naidu

The love-songs, though in many moods, are always the frank expression of emotion that is deep and strong. One that is especially beautiful is the utterance of a young girl who, while her sisters prepare the rites for a religious festival, stands aside with folded hands dreaming of her lover. She is secretly asking herself what need has she to supplicate the gods, being blessed by love ; and again, in the couple of stanzas called "Ecstasy," the rapture has passed, by its very intensity, into pain.

Shelter my soul, O my love !

My soul is bent low with the pain
And the burden of love, like the grace
Of a flower that is smitten with rain :
O shelter my soul from thy face !

But, when all is said, it is the life of her people which inspires this poet most perfectly. In the lighter lyrics one sees the fineness of her touch ; and in the love-poems the depth of her passion. But, in the folk-songs, all the qualities of her genius have contributed. Grace and tenderness have been reinforced by an observant eye, broad sympathy and a capacity for thought which reveals itself not so much as a systematic process as an atmosphere, suffusing the poems with gentle pensiveness. And always the artistic method is that of picking out the

Contemporary Poets

theme in bright sharp lines, and presenting the idea concretely, through the grouping of picturesque facts. There is a poem called "Street Cries" which is a vivid bit of the life of an Eastern city. First we have early morning, when the workers hurry out, fasting, to their toil ; and the cry ' Buy bread, Buy bread ' rings down the eager street ; then midday, hot and thirsty, when the cry is ' Buy fruit, Buy fruit ' ; and finally, evening.

When twinkling twilight o'er the gay bazaars,
Unfurls a sudden canopy of stars,
When lutes are strung and fragrant torches lit
On white roof-terraces where lovers sit
Drinking together of life's poignant sweet,
Buy flowers, buy flowers, floats down the singing
street.

Another of these shining pictures will be found in "Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad," Mrs Naidu's own city ; and again in the song called "In a Latticed Balcony." But there are several others in which, added to the suggestion of an old civilization and strange customs, there is a haunting sense of things older and stranger still. Of such is this one, called "Indian Weavers."

Weavers, weaving at break of day,
Why do you weave a garment so gay ? . .

Sarojini Naidu

Blue as the wing of a halcyon wild,
We weave the robes of a new-born child.

.

Weavers, weaving solemn and still,
Why do you weave in the moonlight chill ? . . .
White as a feather and white as a cloud,
We weave a dead man's funeral shroud.

“*John Presland*”

THE work of “John Presland” reminds one of the trend of contemporary poetry towards the dramatic form. Out of eight volumes published by this poet, five are fully-wrought plays, and one is a tragic love-story told in duologue. That, of course, is a larger proportion of actual drama than most of these poets give ; but if an analysis were made, it would probably be found that the dramatic impulse is strong in the work of nearly all of them.

There are very few of those who are making genuine poetry, who are content simply to sing. Indeed, it hardly seems to be a matter of choice, but an urgency, secret and compelling as a natural instinct, by means of which life is commanding expression in literary art. This is not to suggest, however, that no lyrics are being composed. Current poetry often reveals a true lyrical gift, especially in early work ; and so long as poets continue to be born young, we shall not lack for songs. We may find, too, a rare singer like W. H. Davies, for whom genius, temperament and circumstance have effected a happy isolation from the complexity of modern existence. Owing allegiance chiefly to nature, he is free as the air in body and soul. Unspoilt by

“*John Presland*”

books, and saving his spirit humane and merry and sweet from the petty constraints of civilization, he carols as lightly as a robin or a thrush. But he is almost a solitary exception, and may serve to prove the rule that the pure lyric—some intimate emotion bubbling over into music—cannot say all that demands to be said when the poetic spirit is completely in touch with life.

Now, in all the most vital of this modern verse, poetry has come so close to life as to claim its very identity. It has left the twilight of unreality and stepped into clear day. It has broken down the exclusiveness which penned it within a prescribed circle of theme and of language ; and it has taken hold upon the world, real and entire. Moreover, the life upon which it seizes in this way is wider, more complex, more meaningful and varied than ever before. Political and social changes have made humanity a larger thing—whether regarded in the actual numbers which democracy thus brings within the poetic ken, or in their manifold significance. Horizons, both mental and material, have been extended. Science presses on in quiet confidence, the dogmatic phase being over ; and its methods as well as its data pass readily into the collective mind. Religion, no longer synonymous with a single creed or form of worship, can find

Contemporary Poets

room within itself for all the spiritual activity of mankind everywhere ; and in the juster proportion thus attained, nobler syntheses are shaping. A constructive social sense replaces the old negative commands with a positive duty of service. Values are changing ; new ideals quicken, struggle and fructify ; fresh aspects of life, and visions of human destiny, are opened up ; while in every sphere the spirit of inquiry and the experimental method generate an energy of conflict which the timid and the sleepy loathe, but which is nevertheless the dynamic of progress.

The poetry of to-day is the very spirit of that multiform life, giving shape and permanence to whatever is finest in it ; and for that reason its manner of expression is almost infinitely varied, and often very different from the poetic forms of other ages. That, indeed, is one sign of its vitality : the fact that it is a living organism, capable of adaptation, growth and development. Old forms are modified and new ones created to embody the new ideas. All the resources of prosody are drawn upon—when they will serve—and used with the utmost freedom. And when, as frequently happens, they will not serve ; when the established rules of English verse seem inadequate to the present task, they are challenged and thrown aside. Thus there arises,

“*John Presland*”

in the technique of poetry itself, a corresponding conflict to that in the world of ideas, indicating a similar vigour and equally prophetic of advance.

In all this variety, however, the dramatic element is a fairly constant feature; and it seems to be growing stronger. It is present in many poems which do not look like drama at all, as for instance in the narratives of Mr Masfield. Here we may find vividly dramatic scenes, astonishingly evolved in the form of an elaborate stanza, or the rhymed couplet; just as the tragedies in *Daily Bread* by Mr Gibson are wrought out in a quite original unrhymed verse of extreme austerity. Again, much of Mr Abercrombie's work is dramatic in essence, apart from his plays in regular form; and Mrs Woods has completed a third poetical drama, having already published two tragedies in her collected edition.

But there is one fact to be noted in coming from those poets to the drama of “John Presland.” With them the dramatic impulse is often subconscious, and it has to fight its way, obscurely sometimes, against a twin impulse towards lyricism. It is strong but not yet dominant; vital, but not yet aware of its own potentiality. It throbs below the surface of alien forms, but it rarely breaks away to an independent existence. And even when it

Contemporary Poets

achieves consciousness, as it does most completely perhaps in the work of Mrs Woods, traces of the struggle cling about it still—in a lyrical *motif*, or a fragment of song embedded in the structure of a play, or in a lyric intensity of feeling. With “John Presland,” however, the general tendency is reversed. The dramatic impulse has become a definite and prevailing purpose, with the lyrical element subordinated to it ; and, as a consequence, we have here a drama of full stature, a complete, organic, and acutely conscious art-form.

This work reveals in its author an endowment of those qualities which most insistently urge towards the dramatic form : imagination, both creative and constructive, and a gift of almost absolute objectivity. In all the five plays these qualities are conspicuous. Indeed, they are so strong that they effectually screen the poet’s personality ; and, if he had written nothing but the plays, it is little that one might hope to discover of the individual mind behind them. That is naturally a very desirable result from the dramatist’s point of view, and one test of his art. But it pricks mere human curiosity, and provokes unregenerate glee in the fact that the poet has published lyrics too, three volumes of them ; and that they, from their more subjective nature, yield up the outlines of a definite individuality.

“*John Presland*”

But, indeed, one's delight is not pure mischief. It is partly at least in seeing the artistic virtue of this largesse in the lyric—the spontaneity which is equally a merit with the reticence of drama. One is glad, too, of the light thus thrown upon the poet's own philosophy, his affiliations, his outlook, his attitude to life. Judging by the plays alone, we might be cheated into a belief in the complete detachment of our author. The use of historical themes and the rigour of his art create an effect of isolation. He would seem to stand outside the stress of his own time and aloof from the influences which commonly shape the artist. The lyrics show that impression to be false and help to correct it. For while they do not relate the poet, in any narrow sense, to what are specifically called ‘modern movements,’ they prove that he has an eager interest in his world, and that, being in that world and of it, he is yet ‘on the side of the angels.’ There is, for example, a splendid fire of reproach in the poem “*To Italy*,” proving a capacity for noble indignation at the same time as a close hold upon current affairs. The poem is dated September 29, 1911, and is a protest at the action of Italy against Tripoli :

Hearken to your dead heroes, Italy ;
Hearken to those who made your history
A bright and splendid thing . . .

Contemporary Poets

. . . What Mazzini said
Have you so soon forgotten ? You, who bled
With Garibaldi, and the thousand more ?
He spoke, and your young men to battle bore
His gospel with them, of men's brotherhood,
Of Justice, that before the tyrant, stood
Accusing, and of truth and charity.
His dust to-day lies with you, Italy ;
Where lie his words ? That sword is in your hand
To seize unrighteously another's land—
Your fleet in foreign waters. By what right
Dare you act so, save arrogance of might,
Such cruel force as ground the Austrian heel
Upon your Lombard cities, ringed with steel
Unhappy Naples and despairing Rome,
That exiled Garibaldi from his home,
That served itself with sycophants and knaves,
That filled the prisons and the nameless graves,
Till, like a sunrise o'er a stormy sea,
Flashed out the spirit of free Italy ?

Like all Mr Presland's work, this poem is closely woven : quotation does nor serve it well, but this passage will at least indicate its theme and temper, and thus light up personality. There is, in the same volume, *Songs of Changing Skies*, a bit of spiritual autobiography called "To Robert Browning." It destroys at once any fiction of literary isolation ; although to be sure there are cute critics who will declare that the resemblance to Browning in some of

“John Presland”

these lyrics is too obvious to need the discipular confession. It may be that these clever people are right. Yes, perhaps one would recognize certain signs in poems like “A Present from Luther” and “An Error of Luther’s.” But the whole question of influence is nearly always made too much of, especially in its mere outward marks. Granting the love of Browning and the debt to his teaching, which are honourably admitted here, some effect upon thought and style would be inevitable. But a deeper and more potent cause of the resemblance lies in a real affinity of mind, in buoyancy and breadth and tenacious belief in good ; and in a similar poetic equipment. One must not launch upon a comparison, but it may be observed that he has profited by his master’s faults, artistic and philosophical, at least as much as by his merits. For, probably warned by example, this poet works with patient care to express his thought simply ; and he has attained a style of perfect clearness. While his philosophy, though full of brave hope, has escaped the unreason of that optimism which declares that ‘All’s well.’ True, he makes Joan say, in the last words of his “Joan of Arc” :

. . . . so near eternity
The evil dwindles, good alone remains,
And good triumphant—God is merciful.

Contemporary Poets

But that is dramatically appropriate—the logic of Joan's character. And it seems to me that a more intimate and sincere expression is to be found in the chastened mood of a sonnet called "To April":

There will be other days as fair as these
Which I shall never see ; for other eyes
The lyric loveliness of cherry trees
Shall bloom milk-white against the windy skies
And I not praise them ; where upon the stream
The faëry tracery of willows lies
I shall not see the sunlight's flying gleam,
Nor watch the swallows sudden dip and rise.

Most mutable the forms of beauty are,
Yet Beauty most eternal and unchanged,
Perfect for us, and for posterity
Still perfect ; yearly is the pageant ranged.
And dare we wish that our poor dust should mar
The wonder of such immortality ?

The wistfulness of that wins by its grace where
a more strenuous optimism provokes a challenge ;
just as the tentative 'perhaps' in the last line of
"Sophocles' Antigone" softly woos the sceptic :

There are fair flowers that never came to fruit ;
Cut by sharp winds, or eaten by late frost,
Barrenly in forgetfulness, they're lost
To little-heedful Nature ; so, in suit,

“John Presland”

Beneath the footsteps of calamity
Young lives and lovely innocently come
To total up old evil's deadly sum—
Do the gods pity dead Antigone ?
We look too close, we look too close on earth
At good and evil ; blind are Nature's laws
That kill, or make alive, and so are done.
Not in the circle of this death and birth
May we perceive a justifying cause,
Beyond, perhaps, for God and good are one.

One must not pause to gather up the threads of personality in these three volumes of lyrics ; and, with the more important work in drama still ahead, it is only possible just to glance at their specific values. All the pieces are not equally good, of course, but there is a proportion of exquisite poetry in each volume, and—a healthy sign—the proportion is greatest in the last of the three, *Songs of Changing Skies*, published in 1913. Of this best work there are at least three kinds. There is that which one may call the lyric proper, small in size, simple in design, light in texture, the free expression of a single mood. Such is “From a Window,” in which the peculiar charm of the poet's verse in this kind is well seen. It is not a showy attractiveness : it does not storm the senses nor clamour for approval. It enters the mind quietly, and perhaps with some

Contemporary Poets

hesitancy ; but having entered, it takes absolute possession.

To-night I hear the soft Spring rain that falls
Across the gardens, in the falling dusk,
The Spring dusk, very slow ;
And that clear, single-noted bird that calls
Insistently, from somewhere in the gloom
Of wet Spring leafage, or the scattering bloom
Of one tall pear-tree.
On, on, on, they go,
Those single, sweet, reiterated sounds,
Having no passion, similarly free
Of laughter, and of memory, and of tears,
Poignantly sweet, across the falling rain,
They fall upon my ears.

The delicate rapture of that will fairly represent most of the nature poetry in these volumes ; and it may stand alike for its music and the technical means by which that music is conveyed. It will be seen that there is a close relation between means and end ; that the simple language, natural phrasing and controlled freedom of movement, directly subserve the final effect of clear sweetness. A similar adaptation will be found in verse which is written in a sharply contrasted manner. In "Atlantic Rollers," for instance, we have a bigger theme, demanding by its nature a swifter and stronger treatment. And surely the wild energy and sound,

“*John Presland*”

the dazzling light and colour of stormy breakers have been almost brought within sight and sound, in the speed and vigour of this poem. There is the opening rush, secretly obedient to a metrical scheme ; there is a choice of words which are themselves dynamic ; the rapid, cumulative pressure of the verse, with epithets only to help the rising movement until the crest is reached, at say the tenth or twelfth line ; and then a slight diminution of speed and force, as a richer style describes the breaking wave.

Do you dare face the wind now ? Such a wind,
Bending the hardy cliff-grass all one way,
Hurling the breakers in huge battle-play
On these old rocks, whose age leaves Time behind,
—The whorls and rockets of the fiery mass
Ere earth was earth—shoots over them the spray
In furious beauty, then is twisted, wreathed,
Dispersed, flung inland, beaten in our face,
Until we pant as if we hardly breathed
The common air. See how the billows race
Landward in white-maned squadrons that are shot
With sparks of sunshine.

Where they leap in sight
First, on the clear horizon, they fleck white
The blue profundity ; then, as clouds shift,
Are grey, and umber, and pale amethyst ;
Then, great green ramparts in the bay uplift,
Perfect a moment, ere they break and fall
In fierce white smother on the rocky wall.

Contemporary Poets

The third kind of lyric is perhaps the most interesting, for it points directly to the poet's dramatic gift. It appears quite early in this work ; and indeed, a striking example of it is the duologue which gives its name to the author's first book, *The Marionettes*, published in 1907. It is described in the sub-title as *A Puppet Show*, and a definition of its form would probably be a dramatic lyric. Yet, although the tragic story is sharply outlined and is told by the voices of husband and wife alternately, the poem is not so dramatic in essence as other pieces which are more strictly lyrical in form, notably "Outside Canossa," in the last book. In *The Marionettes* we see the events of the story as they are reflected in the minds of the interlocutors ; as the mood or the thought which they have given rise to. They do not live and move before us in visible action : which is to say, the lyric element predominates. "Outside Canossa," on the other hand, is frankly narrative in form, and has an historical theme. It relates the famous episode of the humiliation of the Emperor Henry IV by Hildebrand, and is necessarily concerned with material that is static in its nature. It must define and describe the scene, announce the antecedents of the story, and throw light upon character. In spite of this, however, the conception of the poem

260

“John Presland”

is dramatic ; and certain vivid situations have been created. As we read we actually live in this snow-clothed, silent forest world ; we stand inside the king's tent as he returns each evening from his bare-foot, bare-headed penance outside Hildebrand's castle gate ; and we tremble, with the waiting courtiers, at the fury of outraged pride in his eyes.

Yesterday,
Speech leapt from out the King, as leaps
A sword-blade, dazzling in the sun
From out its scabbard ; as there leaps
Fire from the mountain, ere it run
Destruction-dealing, far and wide.
“ Rather as Satan damned, I say,
Falling through pride, yet keeping pride,
Than buy salvation at this price. . . .”

To the enraged King the Queen enters softly, carrying her little son ; and though her husband has threatened death to any who should approach him, though he sits with his unsheathed dagger ready to strike, she walks steadily to his side, places the child upon his knee, and goes slowly out without a word.

Through the door
The King has hurled the dagger, holds
His son against his breast, and pain
Contorts him, like a smitten oak ;
Then sets the child upon the floor,

Contemporary Poets

And rises, and undoes the clasp
Of his great mantle (like a stain
Of blood it lies about his feet).
Next from his head he takes the crown,
Holds it arm's-length, and drops it down
Suddenly, from his loosened grasp,
And for the third time goes he forth,
Bare-footed as a penitent,
Humble, and excommunicate,
To stand all day in falling snow
Outside Canossa's guarded gate,
Till Hildebrand shall mercy show.

The dramatic sense is clearly operative there. Here is an instinct which perceives the kinetic values of things ; which seizes unerringly upon the stuff of drama, and, contemplating a character, an event or a situation, feels it start into life under the touch and sees it move forward and rush to a crisis before the eyes. In the lyrics this quality is often merely latent ; but in the plays it has come to full power and has found expression through its own proper medium. It is, of course, the originating impulse of drama as well as the force that shapes it ; and if we would take some measure of this creative energy in our poet, we have only to observe that all of his five plays were published in five years, one play to each year. The first, *Joan of Arc*, appeared in 1909 ; the last, *Belisarius*, came out

262

“*John Presland*”

in 1913; the other three, *Mary Queen of Scots*, *Manin*, and *Marcus Aurelius*, belong respectively to the three intervening years. And there is another ready, representing 1914! Moreover, they are all fully developed and of rather elaborate structure. Being poetic and historical drama, perhaps it is natural that they should follow the Shakespearean model, though their dependence on tradition is a curious fact at this time of day. *Joan of Arc* and *Mary Queen of Scots* are both of five-act length, and the rest are of four acts. Numerous characters are introduced and a great deal of material is handled: incident is plentiful, situations vary and scenes change with some frequency; while underplot and cross-action bring in interests which are additional to, though subserving, the main theme.

Looking at the work thus, and noting its mass and general character, one is impelled to pay a first tribute to the fertility of the genius from which it springs, and to the strength and staying power of the dramatic impulse which directs it. But we soon find that this is reinforced by other qualities which are almost as remarkable. There is what one may call a comprehensive intelligence, ranging over wide areas and gathering material in many places, but keeping it all strictly under control and constantly striving to relate and unify so much diversity.

Contemporary Poets

There is a constructive gift patiently building up, fitting together, organizing and articulating the form of the work. Selection acts persistently ; proportion is generally—though not always—true and fine ; a noble spirit and a manner at once gracious and dignified give the work distinction.

However, all that is little more than to say—here is a genuine artist working conscientiously in a given medium. It does not go far towards a relative estimate of the work as pure drama. Only a detailed critical analysis could do that adequately ; though one may perhaps try to indicate two or three of the prominent features of the plays. Thus in *Joan of Arc* we meet at once certain qualities which become in the later plays definitely characteristic. There is, for example, a conception of the theme which stresses the element of spiritual conflict, and draws upon it, as well as upon its human values, for dramatic inspiration. That is a primary fact in all this work ; and in four of the five plays it is implied in the very name of the protagonist. *Joan*, *Manin*, *Marcus Aurelius* and *Belisarius* are synonyms for the purest spirituality of which human nature is capable. They suggest, before a page of this poetry has been turned, that the conflict out of which drama always springs is in this case largely a matter of invisible forces—of principles and ideas.

“*John Presland*”

And they point to a type of dramatic art which, trending to fine issues, inevitably deals in quiet effects.

There is, in fact, in the extreme grandeur of these four characters, a possible source of weakness to the plays, as actual drama. There is a danger that Joan may be too good a Christian, Marcus Aurelius too austere a stoic, Manin or Belisarius too absolute an idealist, to put up a strenuous fight against destiny. In the final impression of the plays, indeed, one is aware of a vague touch of regret on that very account; and although that may arise from one's own pugnacity, one suspects the existence of a good many other imperfect humans who will share it; from which it may be inferred that the weakness inherent in the subject has not been entirely overcome. I doubt whether it would be possible to overcome it altogether; and by the same token I salute the power which has evoked profoundly moving and stimulating drama out of themes like these.

Again, in *Joan of Arc*, one may see how the poet uses the human elements of a story to make the stirring scenes through which the spiritual crisis is reached. Thus Joan, in the fundamental struggle of her soul for the soul of France, is brought into external conflict which rounds out the plot with

Contemporary Poets

incident. It belongs, of course, to the historical setting of her life, that that conflict is one of actual warfare ; but we are bound to admire the art which has placed her as the central figure of those warring factions—the invading English, the army of the Duke of Burgundy, the Church, and Charles the Dauphin. Out of that come the events through which the action proceeds and the incomparable beauty of her character is revealed.

It is the struggle of Joan's enthusiasm with the apathy and indolence of Charles which gives rise to one of the finest scenes in the play. It occurs in Act I, the whole of which is skilfully designed to set the action moving, while indicating so much of the political situation as ought to be known, and the weakness in Charles' character which is the ultimate cause of Joan's downfall. A premonitory note is struck in the opening dialogue. A little story is told by la Tremoille, who is Joan's chief enemy, of how he had just whipped a ragged prophet in the street and caused him to be stoned. It has a double purpose—to introduce Joan, the prophetess of Domrémy, as a subject of conversation ; and, by reminding us of her own end, to awaken the sense of tragic irony through which we shall view the subsequent action. The talk turns to Joan, who is awaiting audience ; and la Tremoille proposes the

266

“*John Presland*”

trick of the disguise. Charles agrees to it, and goes out to put on the dress of a courtier, while his absence is filled out by a lively dialogue which glances lightly from point to point of court life. When Charles and his train re-enter and Joan is brought in, the scene rises strongly to its climax. Joan recognizes the Dauphin through his disguise and announces her divine mission—

I do declare to you
That I, no other,—neither duke, nor prince,
Nor captain,—no, nor learned gentlemen,
But I alone, a girl of Domrémy,—
Am sent to save you.

By means of a flexible blank-verse, plain diction, and free and nervous phrasing, dialogue runs with an easy vigour. It is fired by strong and quickly changing emotion—the incredulity of Charles, the base hostility of la Tremoille, the indignation of Joan’s friends, or the amazement and curiosity of the courtiers. But for the most part it remains strictly dramatic poetry; that is to say, raised by several degrees above the level of prose, yet closely fitted to personality. When, however, Joan begins to tell about her life, her quiet country home, and the divine command which bade her save her country, the note deepens. The verse becomes lyrical, burning with the mystical passion

Contemporary Poets

which possesses her—a flame, like the grand simplicity of her own nature, white and intensely clear.

JOAN. Sire, it was in the spring ; one afternoon
When I was in a meadow all alone,
Lying among the grasses (over head
The scurrying clouds were like a flock of sheep,
Chased by a sheep-dog) ; then, all suddenly,
I heard a voice—nay, heard I cannot say,
There *was* a voice took hold upon my sense,
As if it swallowed up all other sounds
In all the world ; the birds, the sheep, the bees,
The sound of children calling far away,
The rustling of the rushes in the stream,
Were only like the cloth, whereon appears
The gold embroidery, the voice of God.

ARCHBISHOP. Did you see aught ?

JOAN. Yea, see ! Our earthly words
Cannot express divinity, but like
Small vessels over-filled with generous wine,
They leave the surplus wasted. If I say,
I saw, or heard, that seems to leave untouched
The other senses ; but indeed, my lords,
All of my body seemed transformed to soul.
So I should say I *saw* the voice of God,
And *heard* the light effulgent all around,
Nay, heard, and saw, and felt through all of me
The radiance of the message of the Lord.

Passages like that bring home to us the poetical character of this drama. True, they may remind

“*John Presland*”

us that in such a form of the art action is likely to lag: that its movement may be impeded, as toward the end of *Joan of Arc*, by long speeches. On the other hand, they emphasize the peculiar virtue of this kind of drama; the twofold nature of its appeal, and the fact that the two elements are often found concentrated at their highest degree in single scenes of great power. With genius of this type (if genius may be classified in types!), when the dramatic imagination is most vividly alight, it will inevitably kindle poetry of the finest kind.

Thus, in the last act of *Marcus Aurelius*, we get the force of the whole drama, and all the incidence of the directly preceding scene moving behind and through the Emperor's speech from which I shall quote. The play has shown the complicity of Faustina in the plot to depose her husband: we know that she is a wanton and a traitress. But Marcus is ignorant of the truth, and generously unsuspecting. After the death of Cassius, the chief conspirator, Marcus orders an officer to bring all the dead man's papers to him. It is necessary to examine them for the names of accomplices. They are brought in while he is chatting with Faustina; and she knows that they contain certain incriminating letters that she had written. Ex-

Contemporary Poets

posure is imminent—disgrace and probable death for her await the opening of the letters. She tries every ruse that a bold and cunning mentality can suggest to prevent her husband from reading them. She seems about to succeed, but her insistence faintly warning Marcus, she fails after all. He takes up the package and goes away to open it quietly in his tent, and Faustina, believing that in a few minutes he will know all her treachery, drinks poison and dies. Unconscious of this catastrophe, the Emperor is sitting alone in his tent, with the package of letters on a table before him.

. . . Here, beneath my hand,
 Are laid the hidden hearts of many men.
 What shall I read therein ? Ingratitude,
 Lies, envy, spite, the barbed and venomous word
 Of those that called me Emperor, I called friend ;
 . . . Break the seal, and read
 Which of our subjects, of our intimates,
 Our friends of many years, are netted here.
 How thickly fall the shadows in the tent !
 Almost I fancied, with my tired eyes,
 I saw Faustina there . . . Faustina, you !

If I should find
Her name among the friends of Cassius ?
 Ah no, Faustina, not such perfidy !
 The gods must blush at it ! Am I grown grey

“John Presland”

And learnt no wisdom ? Though it should be so—
Though yet it cannot be—what’s that to me ?
Am *I* wronged by it ? Yet it cannot be,
With that frank brow. I’ve loved you faithfully ;
It could not be so. . .

. . . I will not know
More than I must of unprofitable things,
Lest they should, in the garden of my soul,
Nourish rank weeds of hate and bitterness ;
I will not hate that which I cannot change.

(He drops the papers into a tripod.)

Burn ! Go into oblivion ! The gods
Permit themselves to pity good and bad,
Giving to each the sunshine and sweet rain,
And hiding all things in the mist of years.
May I not do as gods do ? Burn away,
Consume all hate and evil into smoke !
I will not know of them ; assuredly
For me such ills exist not——

(The body of Faustina is brought in.)

The same combination of dramatic elements will be found in the crucial scenes of *Manin* and *Belisarius*. In *Manin* it is especially notable, because of the curious nature of the crisis. This would seem, on the face of it, almost calculated to inhibit the dramatic impulse : to tend to negative the dynamic properties of character and circumstance. *Manin*, the defender of Venice, has held his city against the Austrian enemy by sheer force of

Contemporary Poets

character. His courage and confidence and determination have heartened the Venetians to continue their resistance ; and his statesmanship has been diligent in trying to secure the intervention of France or England, or military aid from Kossuth. But help is refused from every quarter ; the garrison is small and weak ; the people are starving, and ravaged by disease. Nevertheless, inspired by their leader, they are willing and eager to resist to the end, although they know that this must bring on them the hideous penalties with which the Austrians notoriously punished that kind of patriotism.

The crux of the drama lies in the problem thus presented to Manin. It is essentially a spiritual struggle : between wisdom on the one hand and patriotic ardour on the other ; between foresight and courage ; between the long, weary, unattractive processes that make for life and the blind impetuosity that makes for death ; between, in his personal career, a prospect of humiliation in exile and the glory of a hero's end. Given the character of Manin, victory in the conflict was bound to lie with reason against passion, with sagacity against recklessness ; but the victory in this case meant defeat—physical and apparently moral. It would mean to the world, and even to his own people, that, with the surrender of the town, he yielded

“*John Presland*”

up the very principles for which he stood. Therein, of course, lies the unusual nature of this crisis. The dramatic instinct has somehow to vitalize a dead weight of failure. To see how that is done—and it *is* done, finely—one must turn to the scene in Act III, which is the core of the play. There the poet creates an external conflict between Manin and the people which embodies, as it were, the spiritual struggle; and, translating it into action, visibly reveals Manin as a conqueror. Quotations hardly do justice to the poet here, but there are two speeches, one before and one after Manin has won the people to the proposed surrender, which indicate the skill of the art at this point.

The first expresses the agony of failure in Manin's mind, resulting from his decision to yield to the enemy. It is in answer to his faithful friend and secretary, Pezzato, who has been trying to comfort him with a prediction that the freedom of their city and their land is only deferred, that it must ultimately come. Manin replies :

I shall not see it.
I shall be blind beneath my coffin lid
There in a foreign land ; I shall not see
The glory and the splendour of St. Mark's
When our Italian flag salutes the sun ;
I shall be deaf, and never hear the peal

Contemporary Poets

Of our triumphant bells, and volleying guns ;
I shall be dumb, I shall be dumb that day,
And never say " My people, for this hour
I saved you when I sacrificed you most."

The second passage burns with the fire of triumph, tragical but prophetic, which has been kindled in Manin by his struggle with the opposing will of the people and his victory over it :

Of this one thing be sure. A little time,
A little hour, in the span of years
That history devours, we submit
To bow before the flail of tyranny ;
Ay, it may strike us down, and we may die
With Europe passive round our Calvary ;
Yet that for which we stand, for liberty,
For equal justice, and the right of laws
Purely administered, can never die,
Being of the nature of eternity ;
Nor all the blood that Austria has shed
Mar the indelibility of truth ;
Nor all the graves that Austria has dug
Bury it deep enough ; nor all the lies
That coward hearts have bandied to and fro,
And coward hearts received to trick themselves,
Smother the face of it.

There remains to be particularly noted the poet's gift of realizing character. It is seen at its best in *Mary Queen of Scots*, where the unfortunate Queen is very strikingly re-created. Out of the diverse

“*John Presland*”

and stormy elements of her nature she is made to live again with a clear unity and completeness which are amazing. That is largely the reason why this play is the most powerful of the five, from the point of view of pure drama. Its theme is unerringly chosen, for drama inheres in Mary's being. The seeds of tragedy lurk in her contrasted weakness and strength, excess and defect, nobility and baseness. And, because she has been so brilliantly studied, this play moves at every step to the majestic truth that character is destiny.

The broad lines of Mary's personality are established in the first act, revealing at once the springs of action. The sensuous basis of her nature, her strong will and quick temper, may be seen to set in motion the forces which will presently overwhelm her. Her widowed state is irksome—therefore she will marry. She hates authority—therefore she will make her own choice in the matter of a husband. And finer threads already begin to complicate the issues. She is really fond of Darnley, the weak youth whom she is determined to marry; but that motive is intricately mixed with the satisfaction of insulting Elizabeth through him; while her ready wit gives a spice to her malice which, in dialogue at least, is very refreshing. When she enters the audience-chamber she calls

Contemporary Poets

Darnley to her side and, with a gesture towards the gloomy faces of the disaffected nobles, says in merry mockery :

. . . . look you there
On these good gentlemen, all friends of ours,
The earls of Morton, Ruthven, and Argyll :
For friends they are—upon their countenance
We see it written.

She turns to the English ambassador :

. . . Here's Sir Nicholas.
What news of our dear cousin ? Has she come
At last to give that virgin heart away
Into another's keeping, that brave Archduke,
Who'd bite your hand, they say, as soon as kiss it—
Such manners are in Austria—or Charles,
My dear French brother, who is well enough,
And only fourteen years her junior ?
Not yet the happy moment ? Patience, then,
Another day you'll have that news for us.

Sir Nicholas states formally Elizabeth's objections to Darnley, who interjects :

By my beard !
MARY. No ! No !
Not by your beard, dear Henry, or your oath
Is emptier than a prince's promises—
Some princes we have heard of, we would say,
Though cannot think it truth. Nay, let me hear
What is it that my sister Princess will
Out of the largeness of her heart for me ?

“John Presland”

The complexity of Mary's character is well brought out. There is, for instance, the little scene with Mary Beaton at the beginning of Act II. Here the Queen, discovering Darnley's infidelity, passes rapidly through half a dozen moods—from satirical bitterness to a fury of pride, and then to tears in which humiliation, gratitude, and tenderness are mingled. Mary Beaton has just said that the people pity their Queen :

MARY. . . . On my life,

I'll not be pitied : pity is a chafe

On open wounds of pride. To pity me

Makes me a beggar—dare you pity me ?

BEATON. Sweet lady, I would not, but must perforce !

MARY. Nay, would you have me weep ? What thing
am I

That three soft words should drive the tear drops forth

Like floods in winter ? Nay, nay, good my girl,

This is my body's weakness, not my soul's.

The gentleness of that gives place at the entrance of Darnley to intense scorn, changing to indignation when he compels her to answer him, and to provocative coquetry at his insult to Rizzio. In the second scene of this act a new aspect of her mentality develops. The action here, dramatically splendid in its speed and emotion, grows out of Mary's recklessness, and proceeds directly, through the

Contemporary Poets

jealousy of Darnley, to Rizzio's murder and Mary's secret plot to avenge him. It would seem, in the astonishing duplexity of her nature, that there could be nothing more to reveal; yet the profounder forces of it only begin to be operative from this point. Bothwell, as she designs the scheme, is to be merely the tool of her shrewd intelligence. But she is betrayed by the force of her own passion, which transforms Bothwell into the means of her destruction. The finest achievement of this portrayal is that which shows the Queen conscious of her infatuation, and perceiving the tragedy which it is preparing, but incapable of stemming the flood that is carrying her away. Intelligence remains acute: reason holds as clear a light to consequence as ever it did, but both are ineffectual against the storm of instinct. Here is a passage from the end of Act III in which Bothwell after a rebuff has protested his love for the Queen:

MARY. Nay, swear not; nay, I know you what you are—
Hotter than flame in your desires; false—
Falsar than water.

BOTHWELL (*embracing her*). Be a salamander,
To live for ever in the midst of fire.

MARY. Oh, Bothwell! Oh, my love! I am bewitched
To love you so. You are a deadly poison
That's crept through all my veins; you are the
North,

“*John Presland*”

And I the needle ; I must turn to you
From every quarter of the hemispheres.

. . . I am yours
Utterly, wholly ; when I walk abroad,
Jewelled and brocaded, I feel all men's eyes
Can see me naked, and, from head to foot,
Branded in red-hot letters with your name.

BOTHWELL. This is indeed love !

MARY. You may call it so !

It is not that which most men mean by love—
A moment's idle fancy. No, this love
Is like a dragon, laying waste the land
Of all my life ; it is a deadly sickness,
Of which we both shall die ; it is a sin,
Of which we both are damned, the saints of God
Not finding mercy ; there's no pleasure in it,
But dust in the mouth and saltness in the eyes.

One would like to indicate further the truth with which the character is studied through the last two acts, providing the material as it does for scenes of great power and range of effect. Particularly one would wish to convey some idea of the scene of the final tragedy, broadly conceived against a background of the angry Edinburgh populace, and throbbing with the defiance of the Queen. Psychological imagination here is no less than brilliant, and one could cull perhaps half a dozen passages to illustrate it. But a single extract must suffice ; and that is chosen for the additional

Contemporary Poets

reason that its closing sentences contain the very root of the tragedy. It is from Act IV, and the scene, following upon Mary's marriage to Bothwell, is designed to show her last desperate struggle against him and against herself. Already she is remorseful, disillusioned, and bitter; she knows the marriage to be hateful to her people, and she has found Bothwell cruel and treacherous. Before the nobles, who are assembled to receive them, she taunts Bothwell that he is not royal; flouts him for Arthur Erskine; declares that she will never wear jewels again; and at last provokes from Bothwell angry abuse and threats of violence. The nobles interpose to protect her, and beg her to let them save her from him. It needs but one word of assent to be rid of him for ever. She is almost won; she takes a few steps towards them, and actually gives her hand to one of them. Then she hesitates, turns, and looks at her husband :—

MARY. I am yours, Bothwell.

BOTHWELL. Will you go with me ?

MARY. Ay, to the world's end, in my petticoat.

BOTHWELL. Let go her hands, my lord.

MORTON. Ay, let them go,

And let *her* go, for naught can save her now.

Not ours the fault.

“John Presland”

MARY. Not yours, nor his, nor mine.
’Tis not the fault of floods to drown, nor fire
To burn and shrivel—no, nor beasts to bite,
Nor frosts to kill the flowers—not the fault,
Only the property. There’s something here
That’s stronger than our wishes and our wills.
There is no going back ; our course is laid,
And we must keep it, though it lead to death.
Good-bye, my lords. My husband, let us go.

James Stephens

ONE does not put a poet like Mr Stephens into a group—it cannot be done. If you try to do it, weakly yielding a wise instinct to mere intelligence, one of two things will happen. You will return to your careful group the moment after you thought you had made it, to find either that Mr Stephens has vanished or that the others have. Either he has broken away from the ridiculous frail links which bound him, and is already disappearing on the horizon with a gleeful shout, or his unfortunate companions have vanished before so much exuberance.

That is why this poet was not included in the Irish chapter where, if the thing were possible at all, one would have hoped to catch him. There are many fine racial strands out of which you would think a net could be woven. They appear to enmesh an Irishman and an Irish poet. We think we recognize that eye, critical and appreciative, for a woman—or a horse. We believe we know that wit, with a touch of satire and another touch of merry malice. We are surely not mistaken in that adoration of beauty and its converse hatred of ugliness ; while we have no doubt whatever about that passion for liberty.

James Stephens

But the true poet will transcend his nation, as he does his manhood, at times of purest inspiration ; and Mr Stephens has those happy seasons—happy, surely, for those to whom he sings, though, doubtless, each with its own agony to him. In many of the slighter poems, however, all of them good and most of them quite beautiful, the signs of nationality are obvious. They are comically clear, in fact, proceeding as they do directly from the quick, keen perception of the Comic Spirit itself. Only a blessed simpleton whose name was Patsy, could see the angel who walks along the sky sowing the poppy-seed. The word ‘Sootherer’ sounds like English ; and indeed individuals of the species are not unknown in this country. But they, like the word, are native to the land of the born lover. Has anybody heard of a Saxon who could fit names like these to his sweetheart—Little Joy, Sweet Laughter, Shy Little Gay Sprite ? or who could woo her with such a ripple of flattery—

. . . You are more sweetly new
Than a May moon : you are my store,
My secret and my treasure and the pulse
Of my heart’s core.

But, on the other hand, no mere English boy could hope to match the glib rage of spite in this disappointed youth—

Contemporary Poets

You'll go—then listen, you are just a pig,
A little wrinkled pig out of a sty ;
Your legs are crooked and your nose is big,
You've got no calves, you have a silly eye,
I don't know why I stopped to talk to you,
I hope you'll die.

Again, no Jack Robinson, though the dull smother that he would call his imagination were fired by plentiful beer, could ever have conceived of "What Tomas an Buile Said in a Pub"; or could have accompanied Mac Dhoul on his impish adventure into heaven, to be twitched off God's throne by a hand as large as a sky, and sent spinning through the planets—

Scraping old moons and twisting heels and head
A chuckle in the void. . . .

These outward marks are unmistakable ; and so, too, are certain qualities in the essence and texture of the work. His lyric moods may be as tender and fanciful, though always more spontaneous, than those of Mr Yeats. And one may find the arrowy truth, the rich earthiness and the profound sense of tragedy of a Synge. But the filmy threads which seem to stretch between Mr Stephens and his compatriots have no strength to bind him. They are, indeed, only visible when he is ranging at some altitude that is lower than his highest reach.

James Stephens

When he soars to the zenith, as in "The Lonely God" and "A Prelude and a Song," their tenuity snaps. He has gone beyond what is merely national and simply human ; and has become just a Voice for the Spirit of Poetry.

Nevertheless the affinities of this poet with what is best in modern Irish literature would make a fascinating study. Foremost, of course, there is imagination. You will find in him the true Hibernian blend of grotesquerie and grandeur, pure fantasy and shining vision. But each of these things is here raised to a power which makes it notable in itself, while all of them may sometimes be found in astonishing combination in a single poem. In the book called *Insurrections*, which is dated 1909, and appears to represent Mr Stephens' earliest efforts in verse, there is the piece which I have already named, "What Tomas an Buile Said in a Pub." Already we may see this complex quality at work. Tomas is protesting that he saw God ; and that God was angry with the world.

His beard swung on a wind far out of sight
Behind the world's curve, and there was light
Most fearful from His forehead . . .

.
He lifted up His hand—
I say He heaved a dreadful hand

Contemporary Poets

Over the spinning Earth, then I said "Stay,
You must not strike ~~at~~ God ; I'm in the way ;
And I will never move from where I stand."
He said " Dear child, I feared that you were dead,"
And stayed His hand.

You will see—a significant fact—that there is no nonsense about a dream or a transcendent waking apparition. In the opening lines Tomas says, with anxious emphasis, that he saw the ' Almighty Man '—and that is symbolical. It has its relation to the mellow tenderness with which the poem closes ; but apart from that it is a sign of the way in which the creative energy always works in this poetry. It seizes upon concrete stuff ; and that is fused, hammered and moulded into shapes so sharp and clear that we feel we could actually touch them as they spring up in our mental vision. This is not peculiar to Mr Stephens, of course. It would seem to be common to every poet—though to be sure they are not many—in whom sheer imagination, the first and last poetic gift, is pre-eminent. Mr Stephens has many other qualities, which give his work depth, variety and significance ; but fine as they are, they take a secondary place beside this ardent, plastic power.

We quickly see, even in the early poem from which I have quoted, the mixed elements of this gift. Now

James Stephens

the grotesquerie which seems to lie in the fact that Tomas tells about the majesty and familiar kindness of God 'in a pub,' may be apparent only. It probably arises from one's own sophistication and painful respectability. We have lost the simplicity which would make it possible to talk about such a subject at all; and as for doing it in a pub. . . . !

Yet there is something truly grotesque in this work. That is to say, there is a juxtaposition of ideas so violently contrasted that they would provoke instant mirth if it were not for the grave intensity of vision. Sometimes, indeed, they are frankly absurd. We are meant to laugh at them, as we do at Mac Dhoul, squirming with merriment on God's throne with the angels frozen in astonishment round him. But generally these extraordinary images are presented seriously, and often they are winged straight from the heart of the poet's philosophy. Then, the driving power of emotion and a passion of sincerity carry us safely over what seems to be their amazing irreverence. There is, for instance, in the piece called "The Fulness of Time," a complete philosophic conception of good and evil, boldly caught into sacred symbolism. The poet tells here how he found Satan, old and haggard, sitting on a rusty throne in a distant star.

Contemporary Poets

All his work was done ; and God came to call him
to Paradise.

Gabriel without a frown,
Uriel without a spear,
Raphael came singing down
Welcoming their ancient peer,
And they seated him beside
One who had been crucified.

It is not irreverence, of course, but the audacity of poetic innocence. Only an imagination pure of convention and ceremonial would dare so greatly. And the remarkable thing is that this naïveté is intimately blended with a grandeur which sometimes rises to the sublime. The noblest and most complete expression of that is in "The Lonely God." That is probably the reason why this poem is the finest thing that Mr Stephens has done—that, and the magnitude of its central idea. There is, indeed, the closest relation here between the thought and the imagery in which it is made visible. But, keeping our curious, impertinent gaze fixed for the moment on the changing form of the imaginative essence of the work, let us take first the opening lines of the poem :

So Eden was deserted, and at eve
Into the quiet place God came to grieve.
His face was sad, His hands hung slackly down
Along his robe . . .

James Stephens

. . . All the birds had gone
Out to the world, and singing was not one
To cheer the lonely God out of His grief—

There follow several stanzas of exquisite reverie as the majestic figure paces sadly in Adam's silent garden and pauses before the little hut

Chaste and remote, so tiny and so shy,
So new withal, so lost to any eye,
So pac't of memories all innocent. . . .

Then, reminiscent of the dear friendliness of those banished human souls, desolation comes upon the solitary Being. He remembers that he is eternal and ringed round with Infinity. He sends thought flying back through endless centuries, but cannot find the beginning of Time. He ranges North and South, but cannot find the bounds of Space. He is most utterly alone—save for his silly singing angels—in the monotonous glory of his heaven.

. . . Many days I sped
Hard to the west, a thousand years I fled
Eastwards in fury, but I could not find
The fringes of the Infinite. . . .
—till at last
Dizzied with distance, thrilling to a pain
Unnameable, I turned to Heaven again.

Contemporary Poets

And there My angels were prepared to fling
The cloudy incense, there prepared to sing
My praise and glory—O, in fury I
Then roared them senseless, then threw down the
sky
And stamped upon it, buffeted a star
With My great fist, and flung the sun afar :
Shouted My anger till the mighty sound
Rung to the width, frightening the furthest bound
And scope of hearing : tumult vaster still,
Thronging the echo, dinning my ears, until
I fled in silence, seeking out a place
To hide Me from the very thought of Space.

There was once a reviewer who compared the genius of this poet to that of Homer and Æschylus. Now comparisons like that are apt to tease the mind of the discriminating, to whom there instantly appear all the gulfs of difference. But, indeed, this poet does share in some measure, with Æschylus and our own Milton and the unknown author of the Book of Job, a sublimity of vision. His conceptions have a grandeur of simplicity; and he makes us realize immensities—Eternity and Space and Force—by images which are almost primitive. Like those other poets too, whose philosophical conceptions were as different from his as their ages are remote, he also has made God in the image of man. But the comparison does not touch

James Stephens

what we may call the human side of this newer genius; and it only serves to throw into bolder relief its perception of life's comedy, its waywardness, and its mischievous humour. This aspect, strongly contrasted as it is with the poet's imaginative power, is at least equally interesting. It is apparent, in the earlier work, in the realism of such pieces as "The Dancer" or "The Street." There is a touch of harshness in these poems which would amount to crudity if their realism were an outward thing only. But it is not a mere trick of style: it proceeds from indignation, from an outraged æsthetic sense, and from a mental courage which attains its height, rash but splendid, in "Optimist"—

Let ye be still, ye tortured ones, nor strive
Where striving's futile. Ye can ne'er attain
To lay your burdens down.

This poet is not a realist at all, of course—far from it. But he loves life and earth and homely words, he is very candid and revealing, and he has a sense of real values. His humanity, too, is deep and strong, and often supplies his verse with the material of actual existence, totally lacking factitious glamour. Thus we have "To the Four Courts, Please," in which the first stanza describes the

Contemporary Poets

deplorable state of an ancient cab-horse and his driver. Then—

God help the horse and the driver too,
And the people and beasts who have never a friend,
For the driver easily might have been you,
And the horse be me by a different end.

This humane temper is the more remarkable from being braced by a shrewd faculty of insight. There is no sentimentality in it ; and that the poet has no illusions about human frailty may be seen in such a poem as “ Said The Old-Old Man.” It is ballasted with humour, too ; and has a charming whimsicality. Hence the lightness of touch in “ Windy Corner ”—

O, I can tell and I can know
What the wind rehearses :
“ A poet loved a lady so,
Loved her well, and let her go
While he wrote his verses.”
.
.
.
.
.
That's the tale the winds relate
Soon as night is shady.
If it's true, I'll simply state
A poet is a fool to rate
His art above his lady.

Returning, however, to the larger implications of this poetry, one may find a passion for liberty in it, and a courageous faith in the future of the race.

James Stephens

Here we have, in fact, a pure idealist, one of the invincible few who have brought their ideals into touch with reality. One does not suspect it at first—or at least we do not see how far it goes—largely for the reason that it is so deeply grounded. The poet's hold on life, on the actual, on the very data of experience, is unyielding : his perception of truth is keen and his intellectual honesty complete. And then the way in which his imagination moulds things in the round, as it were, leaves no room to guess that there is a limitless something behind or within. True, we have felt all along what we can only call the spiritual touch in this poetry. It is always there, lighter or more commanding, and sometimes it will come home very sweetly in a comic piece, as for instance when "The Merry Policeman," appointed guardian of the Tree, calls reassuringly to the scared thief :

. . . "Be at rest,
The best to him who wants the best."

We have observed, too, a faculty of seeing the spirit of things—a habit of looking right through facts to something beyond them. But still we did not quite understand what these signs meant ; and if we tried to account for them in any way, we probably offered ourselves the all-too-easy explanation

Contemporary Poets

that this was the playful, fanciful, Celtic way of looking at the world. Well, so it may be ; but that charming manner is, in all gravity, just the outward sign of an inward grace. And if anyone should doubt that it points in this case to a clear idealism, he may be invited to consider this little poem which prefaces the poet's second volume, called " The Hill of Vision " :

Everything that I can spy
Through the circle of my eye,
Everything that I can see
Has been woven out of me ;
I have sown the stars, and threw
Clouds of morning and of eve
Up into the vacant blue ;
Everything that I perceive,
Sun and sea and mountain high,
All are moulded by my eye :
Closing it, what shall I find ?
—Darkness, and a little wind.

Now it must not be inferred that Mr Stephens is an austere person who propounds ideals to himself as themes for his poetry. We should detect his secret much more readily if he did—and it may be that we should not like him quite so well. Hardly ever do you catch him, as it were, saying to his Muse : " Come, let us make a song about liberty, or the future." The very process of his thought, as well as the order of his verse, seems often to be

James Stephens

by way of an object to an idea. He takes some bit of the actual world—a bird, a tree, or a human creature; and tuning his instrument to that, he is presently off and away into the blue.

Once, however, he did sing directly on this subject of liberty, and about the external, physical side of it. It was, of course, in that early book; and there may also be found two studies of the idea of liberty in its more abstract nature. They both treat of the woman giving up her life into the hands of the man whom she marries. And in both there is brought out with ringing clarity the inalienable freedom of the human soul. Thus “The Red-haired Man’s Wife,” musing upon the inexplicable changes that marriage has wrought for her—on her dependence, and on the apparent loss of her very identity, wins through to the light—

I am separate still,
I am I and not you :
And my mind and my will,
As in secret they grew,
Still are secret, unreached and untouched and not
subject to you.

Thus, too, “The Rebel” finds an answer to an importunate lover—

You sob you love me—What,
Must I desert my soul
Because you wish to kiss my lips,
.

Contemporary Poets

I must be I, not you,
That says the thing in brief.
I grew to this without your aid,
Can face the future unafraid,
Nor pine away with grief
Because I'm lonely. . . .

It is, however, in "A Prelude and a Song" that this ardour of freedom finds purest expression. Not that the poem was designed to that end. I believe that it was made for nothing on this earth but the sheer joy of singing. How can one describe this poem? It is the lyrical soul of poetry; it is the heart of poetic rapture; it is the musical spirit of the wind and of birds' cries; it is a passion of movement, swaying to the dancing grace of leaves and flowers and grass, to the majesty of sailing clouds; it is the sweet, shrill, palpitating ecstasy of the lark, singing up and up until he is out of sight, sustaining his song at the very door of heaven, and singing into sight again, to drop suddenly down to the green earth, exhausted.—And I have not yet begun to say what the poem really is: I have a doubt whether prose is equal to a definition. In some degree at any rate it is a pæan of freedom: delighted liberty lives in it. But we cannot apply our little distinctions here, saying that it is this or that or the other kind of freedom which is extolled;

James Stephens

because we are now in a region where thought and feeling are one ; in a golden age where good and evil are lost in innocence ; in a blessed state where body and soul have forgotten their old feud in glad reunion.

One hesitates to quote from the poem. It is long, and as the title implies, it is in two movements. But though every stanza has a lightsome grace which makes it lovely in itself—though the whole chain, if broken up, would yield as many gems as there are stanzas, irregular in size and shape indeed, but each shining and complete—the great beauty of the poem is its beauty as a whole. It would seem a reproach to imperil that. Yet there is a culminating passage of extreme significance to which we must come directly for the crowning word of the poet's philosophy. From that we may take a fragment now, if only to observe the reach of its imagination and to win some sense which the poem conveys of limitless spiritual range.

Reach up my wings !
Now broaden into space and carry me
Beyond where any lark that sings
Can get :
Into the utmost sharp tenuity,
The breathing-point, the start, the scarcely-stirred
High slenderness where never any bird
Has winged to yet !

Contemporary Poets

The moon peace and the star peace and the peace
Of chilly sunlight : to the void of space,
The emptiness, the giant curve, the great
Wide-stretching arms wherein the gods embrace
And stars are born and suns. . . .

There follows hard upon that what is in effect a confession of faith. It is not explicitly so, of course. Subjective this poet may be—is it not a virtue in the lyricist ?—but he does not confide his religion to us in so many words. He has an artistic conscience. But the avowal, though it is by way of allegory and grows up out of the imagery of the poem as naturally as a blossom from its stem, is clear enough. And is supported elsewhere, implicitly, or by a mental attitude, or outlined now and then in figurative brilliance. There can be no reason to doubt its strength and its sincerity—and there is every reason to rejoice in it—for it reveals Mr Stephens as a poet of the future.

One pauses there, realizing that the term may mean very much—or nothing at all. It may even suggest a certain technical vogue which, however admirable in the theory of its originators, apparently is not yet justified in the creation of manifest beauty. Our poet has no association with that, of course, except in that he shares the general impulse of the poetic spirit of his generation. That

James Stephens

is, quite clearly, to escape from the tyranny of the past in thought and word and metrical form ; and therein he is at one with most of the poets in this book. We may grant that it is an important exception : that the movement which is indicated here may be the sober British version of its more daring Italian counterpart. Yet there remains still a difference wide enough and deep enough to disclaim any technical relationship.

The root of the matter lies there, however. In Mr Stephens what we may call the poetic instinct of the age works not merely to escape from the past, but to advance into the future—and it has become a conscious, reasoned hope in human destiny. It does not with him so much influence the form of the work as it directs the spirit of it. And that spirit is an absolute and impassioned belief in the future of mankind. Therein he stands contrasted with many of the younger English poets, and with his own compatriots. With many of his compeers the escape has been into their own time, and the noblest thing evolved from that is a grave and tender social conscience. Some, of course, have not escaped at all, and have no wish to do so. Their work has its own soft evening loveliness. But whilst Mr Yeats lives delicately in a romantic past, whilst poor Synge lived tragically in a sardonic present, this

Contemporary Poets

poet stands on his hill of vision and cries to the world the good tidings of a promised land. Here it is, from the closing passage of "A Prelude and a Song" :

There the flower springs,
Therein does grow
The bud of hope, the miracle to come
For whose dear advent we are striving dumb
And joyless : Garden of Delight
That God has sowed !
In thee the flower of flowers,
The apple of our tree,
The banner of our towers,
The recompense for every misery,
The angel-man, the purity, the light
Whom we are working to have his abode ;
Until our back and forth, our life and death
And life again, our going and return
Prepare the way : until our latest breath,
Deep-drawn and agonized, for him shall burn
A path : for him prepare
Laughter and love and singing everywhere ;
A morning and a sunrise and a day !

Margaret L. Woods

ABOUT one half of the poetry in Mrs Woods' collected edition is dramatic in character. There are two plays in regular form, tragedies both. One, *Wild Justice*, is in six scenes which carry the action rapidly forward almost without a break. The other, called *The Princess of Hanover*, is in three acts, which move with a wider sweep through the rise, culmination, and crisis of a tragic story. These two dramas, which are powerfully imagined and skilfully wrought, are placed in a separate section at the end of the book—quite the best wine thus being left to finish the feast.

Fine as they are, however, the plays do not completely represent the poet's dramatic gift. And when we note the comic elements of two or three pieces which are tucked away in the middle of the volume, we may admit a hope that Mrs Wood may be impelled on some fair day to attempt regular comedy. There is, for instance, the fun of the delightful medley called "Marlborough Fair." Here are broad humour and vigorous, hearty life which smells of the soil; little studies of country-folk, incomplete but vivid; scraps of racy dialogue, and the prattle of a child, all interwoven with the

Contemporary Poets

grotesquer fancies of a fertile imagination, endowing even the beasts and inanimate objects of the show with consciousness (and speech. Hints there are in plenty (though to be sure they are in some cases no more than hints) that the poet's dramatic sense would handle the common stuff of life as surely and as freely as it deals with tragedy. In this particular poem, of course, the touches are of the nature of low comedy ; the awkward sweethearting of a pair of rustic lovers ; the showman, alternating between bluster and enticement ; the rough banter of a group of farm lads about the cokernut-shy, and the matron who presides there—

Swarthy and handsome and broad of face
'Twixt the banded brown of her glossy hair.

In her ears are shining silver rings,
Her head and massive throat are bare,
She needs good length in her apron strings
And has a jolly voice and loud
To cry her wares and draw the crowd.

—Fine Coker-nuts ! My lads, we're giving
Clean away ! Who wants to win 'em ?
Fresh Coker-nuts ! The milk's yet in 'em.
Come boys ! Only a penny a shot,
Three nuts if you hit and the fun if not.

The effects are broad and strong, the tone cheery. But in another piece where the dramatic element enters, "The May Morning and the Old Man,"

Margaret L. Woods

the note is deeper. There is, indeed, in the talk of the two old men on the downland road, a much graver tone of the Comic Spirit. One of them has come slowly up the hill and greets another who is working in a field by the roadside with a question. He wants to know how far it is to Chillingbourne ; he is going back to his old home there and must reach it before nightfall.

FIRST OLD MAN. It bean't for j'y I taäk the roäd.

But, Mester, I be gotten awld.

Do seem as though in all the e'th

There bean't no plaäce,

No room on e'th for awld volk.

SECOND OLD MAN. The e'th do lie

Yonder, so wide as Heaven a'most,

And God as made un

Made room, I warr'nt, for all Christian souls.

It is, however, through the medium of tragedy that the genius of Mrs Woods has found most powerful expression. Not her charming lyrics, not even the contemplative beauty of her elegiac poems, can stand beside the creative energy of the two plays to which we must come directly. But the best of the lyrics are notable, nevertheless ; and two or three have already passed into the common store of great English poetry. Of such is the splendid hymn, "To the Forgotten Dead," with

Contemporary Poets

its exulting pride of race chastened by the thought of death.

To the forgotten dead,
Come, let us drink in silence ere we part.
To every fervent yet resolved heart
That brought its tameless passion and its tears,
Renunciation and laborious years,
To lay the deep foundations of our race,
To rear its mighty ramparts overhead
And light its pinnacles with golden grace.
To the unhonoured dead.

To the forgotten dead,
Whose dauntless hands were stretched to grasp the rein
Of Fate and hurl into the void again
Her thunder-hoofed horses, rushing blind
Earthward along the courses of the wind.
Among the stars along the wind in vain
Their souls were scattered and their blood was shed,
And nothing, nothing of them doth remain.
To the thrice-perished dead.

It will be seen that the lyric gift of the poet moves at the prompting of an imaginative passion. It is nearly always so in this poetry. Very seldom does the impulse appear to come from intimate personal emotion or individual experience ; and the volume may therefore help to refute the dogma that the poetry of a woman is bound to be

Margaret L. Woods

subjective, from the laws of her own nature. Occasionally, of course, a direct cry will seem to make itself heard—the most reticent human creature will pay so much toll to its humanity. And it is true that in such a spontaneous utterance the voice will be distinctively feminine—life as the woman knows it will find its interpreter. Thus we see austerity breaking down in the poem “On the Death of an Infant,” mournfully sweet with a mother’s sorrow. Hence, too, in “Under the Lamp” comes the loathing for “the vile hidden commerce of the city”; and equally there comes a touch of that feminine bias (yielding in these late days perhaps to fuller knowledge and consequent sympathy) which inclines to regard the evil from the point of view of the degradation of the man rather than that of the hideous wrong to the woman. Or again, there is “The Changeling,” perhaps the tenderest of the few poems which may perhaps, in some sense, be called subjective. Through the thin veil of allegory one catches a glimpse of the enduring mystery of maternal love. The mother is brooding over the change in her child: she has not been watchful enough, she thinks; and while she was unheeding, some evil thing had entered into her baby and driven out the fair soul with which he began.

Contemporary Poets

Perhaps he called me and I was dumb.

Unconcerned^c I sat and heard

Little things,

Ivy tendrils, a bird's wings,

A frightened bird—

Or faint hands at the window-pane ?

And now he will never come again,

The little soul. He is quite lost.

She tries to woo him back, with prayer and incantations ; but he will not come ; and when at last she is worn out with waiting, she seeks an old wizard and begs him to give her forgetfulness. But it is a hard thing that she is asking : it needs a mighty spell to make a woman forget her son ; and the mother has to go without the boon. She has not wealth enough in the world to pay the Wise Man's fee. But afterwards she is glad that she was too poor to pay the price :

Because if I did not remember him,

My little child—Ah ! what should we have,

He and I ? Not even a grave

With a name of his own by the river's brim.

Because if among the poppies gay

On the hill-side, now my eyes are dim,

I could not fancy a child at play,

And if I should pass by the pool in the quarry

And never see him, a darling ghost,

Sailing a boat there, I should be sorry—

Margaret L. Woods

If in the firelit, lone December
I never heard him come scampering post
Haste down the stair—if the soul that is lost
Came back, and I did not remember.

Such poetry reveals the woman in the poet, and is precious for that reason : it brings its own new light to the book of humanity. But it is not especially characteristic of Mrs Woods' work, for much more often it is the poet in the woman who is revealed there. Powers which are independent of sex—of imagination, of sensibility, and of thought, have gone to the making of that which is finest in her verse ; and surely these are gifts which, in varying degree, distinguish the poetic soul under any guise. They are not equally present here, of course. Imagination overtops them, darting with the lightness of a bird, or soaring majestically, or sweeping, strong and rapid, through a storm-cloud, or putting a swift girdle round the earth. Thought is a degree less powerful, perhaps. It is brooding, museful, tinged with a melancholy that may be wistful or passionate ; and though it commonly revolves the larger issues of life within the canons of authority, it is keen and clear enough to see beyond them, and even, upon occasion, to pierce a way through. But it is not always sufficiently strong to control completely so fertile an imagination ; and there

Contemporary Poets

is no acute sense of fact to reinforce it with truth of detail. Instead of watching, recording, analyzing, after the method of so many contemporary poets, this is a mentality which contemplates and reflects. It leans lovingly toward the past, and has a sense, partly instinctive and partly scholarly, of historic values : while, for its artistic method, it passes all the treasure that fancy has gathered, and even passion itself, through the alembic of memory. So is created a softer grace, a serener atmosphere, and a richer dignity than the realist can achieve—and we will not be churlish enough to complain if, at the same time, the salt of reality is missing.

I should think that "The Builders, A Nocturne in Westminster Abbey," most fully represents this poet's lyrical gift. Individual qualities of it may perhaps be observed more clearly elsewhere ; but here they combine to produce an effect of meditative sweetness and stately, elegiac grace which are very characteristic. The poem is in ten movements, of very unequal length and irregular form. It is unrhymed, and stanzas may vary almost indefinitely in length, as the verse may pass from a dimeter, light or resonant, up through the intervening measures to the roll of the hexameter. But this originality of technique, leaving room for so many shades of thought and feeling, was certainly inspired ; and

308

Margaret L. Woods

below the changeful form runs perfect unity of tone. The creative impulse is subdued to the contemplative mood induced in the mind of the poet as she stands in the Abbey at night and broods upon its history. Her thought goes far back, to the early builders of the fabric whose pale phantoms seem to float in the shades of the 'grey ascending arches.'

When the stars are muffled and under them all the earth
Is a fiery fog and the sinister roar of London,
They lament for the toil of their hands, their souls'
travail—

“ Ah, the beautiful work ! ”

It was set to shine in the sun, to companion the stars
To endure as the hills, the ancient hills, endure,
Lo, like a brand
It lies, a brand consumed and blackened of fire,
In the fierce heart of London.

Or, like Dante, this poet will follow the old
ghosts to a more dreadful region, and bring them
news of home—

Fain would my spirit,
My living soul beat up the wind of death
To the inaccessible shore and with warm voice
Deep-resonant of the earth, salute the dead :

.
I also would bring
To the old unheeded spirits news of Earth ;
Of England, their own country, choose to tell them,

Contemporary Poets

And how above St. Edward's bones the Minister
Gloriously stands, how it no more beholds
The silver Thames broadening among green meadows
And gardens green, nor sudden shimmer of streams
And the clear mild blue hills.
Rather so high it stands the whole earth under
Spreads boundless and the illimitable sea.

The steps of the sentry, pacing over the stones
which cover the great dead below, remind her of
those other builders who lie there, makers of
Empire.

Over what dust the atom footfall passes !
Out of what distant lands, by what adventures
Superbly gathered
To lie so still in the unquiet heart of London !
Is not the balm of Africa yet clinging
About the bones of Livingstone ? Consider
The long life-wandering, the strange last journey
Of this, the heroic lion-branded corpse,
Still urging to the sea !
And here the eventual far-off deep repose.

This poem is characteristic, both in the way it
blends imagination and profound feeling with pen-
sive thought, and in its literary flavour. One may
note the opulent language, enriched from older
sources, the historical lore and the allusive touch
so fascinating to those who love literature for
its own sake. But the poet can work at times in a

Margaret L. Woods

very different manner. There is, for instance, another piece of unrhymed verse, "March Thoughts From England," which is a riot of light and colour, rich scent and lovely shape and bewitching sound—the sensuous rapture evoked by a Provençal scene 'recollected in tranquillity.' Or there is "April," with the keen joy of an English spring, also a glad response to the direct impressions of sense. Imagination is subordinated here ; but if we turn in another direction we are likely to find it paramount. It may be manifested in such various degrees and through such different media that sharp contrasts will present themselves. Thus we might turn at once from the playful fancy of "The Child Alone" (where a little maid has escaped from mother and nurse into the wonderful, enchanted, adventurous world just outside the garden) to the thrice-heated fire of "Again I Saw Another Angel." Here imagination has fanned thought to its own fierce heat ; and in the sudden flame serenity is shrivelled up and gives place to passionate despair. In a vision the poet sees the awful messenger of the Lord leap into the heavens with a great cry—

Then suddenly the earth was white
With faces turned towards his light.
The nations' pale expectancy
Sobbed far beneath him like the sea,

Contemporary Poets

But men exulted in their dread,
And drunken with an awful glee
Beat at the portals of the dead.

I saw this monstrous grave the earth
Shake with a spasm as though of birth,
And shudder with a sullen sound,
As though the dead stirred in the ground.
And that great angel girt with flame
Cried till the heavens were rent around,
“Come forth ye dead!”—Yet no man came.

But from the intensity of that we may pass to the dainty grace of the Songs, where the poet is weaving in a gossamer texture. Or we may consider a love-lyric like “Passing,” a fragile thing, lightly evoked out of a touch of fantasy and a breath of sweet pain.

With thoughts too lovely to be true,
With thousand, thousand dreams I strew
The path that you must come. And you
Will find but dew.

.
I break my heart here, love, to dower
With all its inmost sweet your bower.
What scent will greet you in an hour?
The gorse in flower.

In the plays there are lyrics, too, delicately stressing their character of poetic drama, and giving full compass to the author's powers in each work. Indeed, the combination of lyric and dramatic

Margaret L. Woods

elements is very skilfully and effectively managed. There is a ballad which serves in each case to state the *motif* at the opening of the play : not in so many words, of course, but suggested in the tragical events of some old story. And snatches of the ballad recur throughout, crooned by one of the persons of the drama, or played by a lutist at a gay court festival. But always the dramatic scheme is subserved by the lyrical fragments. Sometimes it will fill a short interval with a note of foreboding, or make a running accompaniment to the action, or induce an ironic tone, or, by interpreting emotion, it will relieve tension which had grown almost too acute. But, fittingly, when the crisis approaches and action must move freely to the end, the lyric element disappears.

“The Ballad of the Mother,” which precedes “Wild Justice,” creates the atmosphere in which the play moves from beginning to end. It prefigures the plot, too, in its story of the dead mother who hears her children weeping from her grave in the churchyard ; and, after vainly imploring both angel and sexton to let her go and comfort them, makes a compact with the devil to release her.

“Then help me out, devil, O help me, good devil !”

“A price must be paid to a spirit of evil.

Will you pay me the price ?” said the spirit from Hell.

Contemporary Poets

"The price shall be paid, the bargain is made."

Boom ! boom ! boom !

From the tower in the silence there sounds the great bell.

"I am fixing the price," said the devil from Hell.

The mother in the play is Mrs Gwyllim, wife of a vicious tyrant. For twenty-one years she had borne cruelty and humiliation at his hands. She had even been patient under the wrongs which he had inflicted on her children : the violence which had maimed her eldest son, Owain, in his infancy ; which had hounded another boy away to sea and had driven a daughter into a madhouse. But at the opening of the play a sterner spirit is growing in her : meekness and submission are beginning to break down under the consciousness of a larger duty to her children. We find that she has been making appeals for help, first to their only accessible relation ; and that failing, to the Vicar of their parish. But neither of these men had dared to move against the tyrant. They live on a lonely little island off the coast of Wales, where Gwyllim practically has the small population in his power. He had built a lighthouse on the coast ; and at the time of the action, which is early in the nineteenth century, he is empowered to own it and to take toll from passing

Margaret L. Woods

vessels. Thus he controls the means of existence of the working people ; and the rest are deterred, by reasons of policy or family interest, from putting any check upon him.

In the first scene the mother announces to her daughter Nelto and her favourite son Shonnin the result of her appeal to the Vicar. His only reply had been to affront her with a counsel of patience, though Gwyllim's misconduct is as notorious as his wife's long-suffering. We are thus made to realize the isolation and helplessness of the family before we proceed to the second scene, with its culmination of Gwyllim's villainy and the first hint of rebellion. He comes into the house, furious at the discovery of what he calls his wife's treachery. Owain, the crippled son, is present during part of the scene ; and Nelto passes and repasses before the open door of an inner room, hushing the baby with stanzas of the ballad which opens the play. In the presence of their children, Gwyllim raves at his wife, taunts her with her helplessness, boasts of his own infidelity, and flings a base charge at her, of which he says he has already informed the parson ; while Nelto croons—

The angels are fled, and the sexton is sleeping,
And I am a devil, a devil from Hell.

The mother does not answer ; but Owain is

Contemporary Poets

goaded to protest. This only excites Gwyllim further, and he strikes Owain as he sits in his invalid chair ; while, Shonnin, coming in from the adjoining room, brings the scene to a climax by asking of his father the money that he needs to go away to school. Gwyllim replies, taking off his coat meanwhile, that there is a certain rule in his family. When a son of his is man enough to knock him down he shall have money to go out into the world ; but not before. He invites Shonnin to try his strength :

GWYLLIM. . . . Come on. Why don't you come on ? I'm making no defence.

SHONNIN. Mother ?

GWYLLIM. Leave her alone. Strike me, boy. I bid you do it.

SHONNIN. Then I will ; with all my might, and may God increase it !

OWAIN. There is no God.

Shonnin strikes three times ; and is then felled by a blow from his father, who goes out, shouting orders to wife as he retreats. The scene closes in a final horror. Nelto, a pretty, high-spirited girl, has hitherto taken little part in the action. Her character, however, has been clearly indicated in one or two strong touches. We realize that she is young, impulsive, warm-hearted ; keenly sensitive to beauty, wilful and bright ; thrilling to her finger-

Margaret L. Woods

tips with life that craves its birthright of liberty and joy. But we see, too, that with all her ardour she is as proud and cold in her attitude to love as a very Artemis. And when she declares that she also has reached the point of desperation, and that sooner than remain longer in the gloom and terror of her home she will fling herself into a shameful career, we feel that the climax has indeed been reached.

In the third scene the plan of wild justice is formulated. It had originated in the mind of Owain, who had fed his brooding temper on old stories of revenge. To him the dreadful logic of the scheme seemed unanswerable. No power on earth or heaven could help them ; either they must save themselves, or be destroyed, body and soul. He puts his plan before Shonnin—to lure their father by a light wrongly placed, as he rows home at night, on to the quicksands at the other side of the island. But Shonnin, if he has less strength of will than Owain, is more thoughtful and more sensitive. He is appalled at the proposal. Owain reminds him of their wrongs ; asks him what this monster has done that he should live to be their ruin. And Shonnin, seeing the issues more clearly, replies

. . . Nothing ;
But then I have done nothing to deserve
To be made a parricide.

Contemporary Poets

But Nelto has been listening, and hers is a nature of a very different mettle. Besides, as she has put the alternative to herself, it means but a choice between two evils ; and this plan of Owain's seems at least a cleaner thing than the existence she had contemplated. She declares that she will be the instrument of the revenge.

The rest of the play is occupied with the execution of the plan. Scene IV shows us Nelto going on her way down to the sea at night with the lantern that is to lead Gwyllim on to the sands. She is trying not to think ; but the very face of nature seems to reflect the horror that is in her soul—

. . . Down slips the moon.

NELTO. Broken and tarnished too ? Now she hangs
motionless

As 'twere amazed, in a silver strait of sky
Between the long black cloud and the long black sea ;
The sea crawls like a snake.

The figure of a woman suddenly appears in the path. It is her mother ; she has overheard their plans, and for a moment Nelto is afraid that she has come to frustrate them. But Mrs Gwyllim has a very different purpose : she intends to take upon herself the crime that her children are about to commit—

Margaret L. Woods

All's fallen from me now
But naked motherhood. What ! • Shall a hare
Turn on the red-jawed dogs, being a mother,
The un pitying lioness suckle her whelps
Smeared with her heart's blood, this one law be stamped
For ever on the imperishable stuff
Of our mortality, and I, I only,
Forbidden to obey it ?

But Nelto sees that she is too frail and weak for the task ; and entreats her mother to return to the house. Time is slipping, and her father is waiting for the boat.

MRS. GWYLLIM. Ellen, you are too young ;
You should be innocent—

NELTO. Never again
After this night. Come, mother, I am yours ;
Make me a wanton or an avenger.

MRS. GWYLLIM. Powers
That set my spirit to swing on such a thread
Over mere blackness, teach me now to guide it !

NELTO. Mother, the moon dips.

MRS. GWYLLIM. Go, my daughter, go !
And let these hands, these miserable hands,
Too weak to avenge my children, let them be
Yet strong enough to pull upon my head
God's everlasting judgment ! All that weight
Fall on me only !

We see what follows in the closing scenes as a fulfilment of that prayer. Nelto takes the boat

Contemporary Poets

to meet Gwyllim, intending to row him over to the false light that she herself has placed. When he has stepped ashore she is to push off instantly, and leave him either to stride forward into the quicksand, or to be drowned by the tide. Owain and his mother peer from their window through the darkness, trying to follow Nelto's movements by the light on her boat. They have locked Shonnin in his room that he may not know what they are doing and interfere. But he manages to awaken a sleeping child in the next room, and is released in time to discover what is afoot. He seizes another lantern and rushes down to the bay to signal a warning to his father. Meantime Mrs Gwyllim and Owain search the opposite shore with a telescope ; they see the light on the boat approach it, stop for just so long as a man would need to clamber out, and then move away. For a few seconds they distinguish the swaying light that Gwyllim carries, and then it disappears. To their strained imagination it seems that they hear his terrible cry as he reaches the quicksand ; and at the same time they are horrified to see that Nelto's boat is returning to him. She also has heard the cry, and has gone back to try to save her father. The light moves forward, slowly at first and then more quickly, as Nelto seems to spring ashore. A moment afterwards it too goes out.

Margaret L. Woods

No other sign comes to the watchers, for when they turn their glasses to the nearer shore Shonnin also has disappeared. They keep their dreadful vigil till dawn ; and then the mother, pitifully hoping against hope, goes out to seek her children.—She returns with Nelto's shawl.

MRS. GWYLLIM. Where are my children, if they are not there ?

They cannot both be—Owain, where are they ?

OWAIN [*Makes a gesture towards the sea*] Mother,
May God have mercy on us !

MRS. GWYLLIM. No, not both,
Not both ! She's somewhere in the house. Come,
Ellen !

She is afraid to come. Come, Nelto, Nelto !
Shonnin, my heart's adored, Shonnin, my love,
Do not be angry with me, answer, Shonnin,
Shonnin ! Not dead—not dead !

OWAIN. O hush—hush—hush !

In a summary of this kind it is impossible to indicate all the dramatic values of the work. One cannot show, for instance, how the characters come to life, and by touches bold or subtle, develop an individuality out of which the conflict of the drama springs. Even the conflict itself can hardly be suggested, for an outline of the story gives only the physical action ; whilst there is a spiritual struggle in the minds of at least two of the characters which

Contemporary Poets

is infinitely more tragical. And neither can one hope to convey any sense of the force with which the play takes possession of the mind. That is of course, its chief artistic excellence ; and on a moment's consideration it is seen to be a remarkable achievement. For although the poet is working towards a catastrophe very remote from ordinary experience, and in a poetic medium deeply stamped with the marks of an earlier age, she has succeeded in evoking a powerful illusion of reality. Here and there, indeed, are signs that the handicap she has imposed upon herself is almost too great. There is, perhaps, a shade of excess in the portraiture of Gwyllim ; or, to put it in another way, the author has not taken an opportunity to balance what is extraordinary in this character with the relief which would have suggested a complete personality. And now and then there is a hint of incongruity in the use of a rich Elizabethan diction, even for Owain, who is supposed to be steeped in the literature of that age.

Those are not radical defects, however, for they do not interrupt the enjoyment of the drama : they only emerge as an afterthought. If the incompleteness of Gwyllim disturbed our conviction of his villainy, the whole plot would be weakened. Whereas we are profoundly convinced that the wrongs of his family are intolerable, and the revolt

Margaret L. Woods

a natural consequence. Similarly, if the exuberant Elizabethan language were really unfitted to the spirit of the work, I imagine that it would be barely possible to read the drama through, so irritating would be its ineptitude. But, as a fact, the language wins upon us somehow as the right expression for these people. We are probably satisfied, sub-consciously, that human creatures who have been thrust back to an almost elemental stage of passion and thought, might talk in some such way. In any case the emotional force of that old style, with its vivid imagery and metaphor and its copious flow, does somehow suit the intensity and gloomy grandeur of this play.

I am not sure that it suits *The Princess of Hanover* quite so well—which is curious, considering that we have, in the royal theme of this drama, a subject which might be supposed to require an ornate style. But in treating the tragic love-story of Sophia of Zell the poet was bound to reproduce something of the atmosphere of the Hanoverian Court, with its intrigues and indecencies and absurd conventionality. And at such points poetry lends too large a dignity. In those scenes, however, where as in "Wild Justice," the author comes to deal with naked passion and with turbulent thought that is driving some person of the drama to disaster, the instru-

Contemporary Poets

ment is admirably fitted to its purpose. Thus, in the second half of the play, when the unfortunate Princess at last yields to her lover, Königsmarck, and plots with him to escape from her sottish husband, there are moments when it seems that no other medium would serve. There is, for example, the crucial scene in the second act when the endurance of the Princess finally gives way. The action turns here directly towards its tragic culmination ; for the Princess, who had hitherto saved her honour at the cost of her love, suddenly breaks down at an insult from the old Electress. The revulsion of feeling as she flings restraint away carries her to an ecstatic sense of liberty. As the Electress goes out and she is left alone with her lady-in-waiting, she laughs bitterly and declares that she is now free for ever from the House of Hanover.

LEONORA.

Weeping, dear lady,

Will balm our misery better than laughter.

PRINCESS. Misery ? I am mad with all the joy

Of all my years, my youth-consuming years'

Hoarded, unspent delight.

Say, Leonora,

Where are my wings ? Do they not shoot up radiant,

A splendour of snowy vans, swimming the air

Just ere the rush of rapture ?

One might quote a dozen such passages, in which

Margaret L. Woods

a rush of emotion seems to overflow most naturally into poetical extravagance, There is the rhapsody of the Electress—significantly, upon the theme of Queen Elizabeth. There are the love-scenes, passionate or tender, between Königsmarck and the Princess; and the fierce moods—of sheer avidity or hatred or remorse—of the courtesan who contrives their downfall. But the only other illustration which need be given is taken from the last scene of the play; and has a further importance which must be noted. I mean the tragic irony which underlies it, and, running throughout the scene, closes the play on a note of appalling mockery.

The scene is in the Electoral Palace at night, or rather very early morning, when the grey light is slowly coming. The Princess and Leonora have come into the outer hall of their apartments to burn certain papers in the fireplace there. Their plans are all made for flight with Königsmarck on the following day; and as they kindle the fire they talk, the Princess eagerly and Leonora with more caution, about their chances of escape. But on the very spot where they stand, Königsmarck had been secretly assassinated less than an hour before. And at this moment, while they are talking, his body is being hastily bricked into a disused staircase leading out of the hall. Faint sounds of the work

Contemporary Poets

reach the ears of the ladies as they begin their task ; but though Leonora^s is disquieted, the Princess will not listen to her fears. She is on the crest of a mood of exaltation—

PRINCESS. The night is almost over,
Soon will the topmost towers discern the day.
The day ! The day ! O last of all the days
I have spent in extreme penury of joy,
In garish misery, unhelped wrong,
And in unpardonable dishonour. . . .

Up lingering dawn !
Why dost thou creep so pale, like one afraid ?
I want the sun ! I want to-morrow !

LEONORA. Madam,
There was a hand on the door. What can these
builders
Be doing here at this hour ?

PRINCESS. Why, they're building.
What does it matter ? Let them build all night,
I warrant they'll not build a wall so high
Love cannot overleap it.

Bibliography

LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

Interludes and Poems. John Lane. 1908.

The Sale of St Thomas. Published by the Author.
(Out of Print.) 1911.

Emblems of Love. John Lane. 1912.

Deborah. John Lane. 1913.

Contributions to *New Numbers*, February, April,
August, December, 1914. (Out of Print.)

EVA GORE BOOTH

The Three Resurrections and The Triumph of Maeve.
Longmans. 1905.

The Agate Lamp. Longmans. 1912.

The Sorrowful Princess. Longmans. 1907.

RUPERT BROOKE

Poems. Sidgwick & Jackson. 1911.

1914 and Other Poems. Sidgwick & Jackson. 1915.

Contributions to *New Numbers.* (See ABER-
CROMBIE.)

JOSEPH CAMPBELL

The Mountainy Singer. Maunsel. 1909.

Irishry. Maunsel. 1913.

PADRAIC COLUM

Wild Earth. (Out of Print.) 1907.

Contemporary Poets

JOHN MASEFIELD—*continued*

Dauber. Wm. Heinemann. 1913.

Daffodil Fields. Wm. Heinemann. 1913.

Philip the King. Wm. Heinemann. 1914.

The Faithful. Wm. Heinemann. 1915.

ALICE MILLIGAN.

Hero Lays. Maunsel. 1908.

SUSAN L. MITCHELL

The Living Chalice. Maunsel. 1913.

Aids to the Immortality of Certain Persons in Ireland.

Maunsel. 1913.

HAROLD MONRO

Judas. Sampson Low. 1908.

Before Dawn. Constable. 1911.

Children of Love. Poetry Bookshop. 1914.

Trees. Poetry Bookshop. 1915.

SAROJINI NAIDU

The Golden Threshold. Wm. Heinemann. 1905.

The Bird of Time. Wm. Heinemann. 1912.

SEUMAS O'SULLIVAN

Poems. Maunsel. 1912.

An Epilogue. Maunsel. 1914.

"JOHN PRESLAND"

The Marionettes. T. Fisher Unwin. 1907.

Joan of Arc. Simpkin Marshall. 1909.

Mary Queen of Scots. Chatto & Windus. 1910.

Bibliography

“JOHN PRESLAND”—*continued*

The Deluge. Chatto & Windus. 1911.

Manin. Chatto & Windus. 1911.

Marcus Aurelius. Chatto & Windus. 1912.

Songs of Changing Skies. Chatto & Windus. 1913.

Belisarius. Chatto & Windus. 1913.

JAMES STEPHENS

Insurrections. Maunsel. (Out of Print.) 1909.

The Hill of Vision. Maunsel. 1912.

Songs from the Clay. Macmillan. 1915.

MRS MARGARET L. WOODS

Collected Poems. John Lane. 1914.

ELLA YOUNG

Poems. Tower Press Booklets. 1906.

NOTE.—The lists do not, in every case, include all the author's works; the principal object being to give the books mentioned in the Studies.

